

FAMILY COMMUNICATION

SECOND EDITION

CHRIS SEGRIN AND JEANNE FLORA

Family Communication

Family Communication carefully examines state-of-the-art research and theories of family communication and family relationships. In addition to exploring cutting-edge research, it focuses on classic theories and findings that have influenced and revolutionized the way scholars conceptualize family interaction. This text offers a thorough and up-to-date presentation of scientific study in family communication for both students and teachers of family communication, as well as for professionals who work with families.

New to the second edition is an increased focus on understudied family relationships. A companion website provides additional resources for students and instructors. The text will be a valuable resource for undergraduates, and advanced readers, such as graduate students and professionals, will find it a useful reference to classic and contemporary research on family communication and relationships.

Chris Segrin (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin) is Professor of Communication and Communication Department Head at The University of Arizona. He specializes in interpersonal relationships and mental health. His research can be found in journals such as *Human Communication Research*, *Communication Monographs*, *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, *Communication Research*, and *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*.

Jeanne Flora (Ph.D., University of Kansas) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at New Mexico State University. Her research and teaching interests include interpersonal and family relationships, with a focus on relationship development and maintenance. Her research has been published in journals such as *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *Journal of Family Psychology*, *Journal of Family Communication*, and *Human Communication Research*.

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Family Communication

Second Edition

Chris Segrin

University of Arizona

Jeanne Flora

New Mexico State University

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Contents

| | |
|---|------------|
| <i>List of Figures</i> | vii |
| <i>List of Tables</i> | viii |
| <i>Preface</i> | ix |
| | |
| PART I | |
| Introducing Family Communication and Basic Family Processes | 1 |
| 1 Defining Family Communication and Family Functioning | 3 |
| 2 Theoretical Perspectives on Family Communication | 25 |
| 3 Family Interaction Patterns: Norms and Networks, Routines and Rituals, Stories and Secrets | 45 |
| 4 Family Interaction Processes: Power, Decision Making, and Conflict | 67 |
| | |
| PART II | |
| Communication in Family Subsystems | 89 |
| 5 Courtship and Mate Selection | 91 |
| 6 Marriage and Intimate Partnerships | 116 |
| 7 Parent–Child Communication | 142 |
| 8 Sibling Communication | 166 |
| 9 Extended Family Relationships | 183 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| PART III | |
| Communication during Family Stress | 203 |
| 10 Models of Family Stress and Coping | 205 |
| 11 Normative and Nonnormative Family Stressors | 226 |
| 12 Divorce | 247 |
| 13 Renegotiating Family Communication: Remarriage and Stepfamilies | 268 |
| | |
| PART IV | |
| Family Interaction, Health, and Well-Being | 293 |
| 14 Family Interaction and Mental Health | 295 |
| 15 Family Interaction and Physical Health | 320 |
| 16 Family Violence and Abuse | 345 |
| 17 Improving Family Communication and Family Relationships | 370 |
| | |
| <i>References</i> | 389 |
| <i>Author Index</i> | 463 |
| <i>Subject Index</i> | 489 |

List of Figures

| | | |
|------|--|-----|
| 1.1 | Household size between 1970 and 2003 | 11 |
| 1.2 | Age at first marriage by year and sex | 12 |
| 1.3 | The Circumplex Model of Family Functioning | 19 |
| 2.1 | The Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) model of attachment styles | 39 |
| 3.1 | Family types based on conversation and conformity orientations | 50 |
| 3.2 | Revelation risk model | 65 |
| 4.1 | Settles' (1999) model of family decision making | 76 |
| 5.1 | SVR model | 107 |
| 5.2 | Niehuis, Huston, and Rosenband's Ecological Model of Mate Selection | 110 |
| 6.1 | Interpersonal process model of intimacy | 122 |
| 9.1 | Socioemotional selectivity theory: Three salient social motives across the lifespan | 184 |
| 10.1 | Hill's (1949) ABC-X model of family stress | 208 |
| 10.2 | McCubbin and Patterson's (1982) Double ABC-X model of family stress | 210 |
| 10.3 | Patterson's Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response Model | 214 |
| 10.4 | Karney and Bradbury's Vulnerability–Stress–Adaptation Model of Marriage | 217 |
| 12.1 | Gottman's behavioral cascade model of marital dissolution (a.k.a. "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse") | 253 |
| 12.2 | Gottman's Distance and Isolation Cascade | 254 |
| 14.1 | Constantine's model of family conflict, attachment, and depression | 296 |
| 14.2 | Mallinckrodt et al.'s theoretical model of dysfunctional family environments, sexual abuse, and eating disorders | 312 |
| 15.1 | Psychophysiological processes implicated in negative marital interactions and health | 325 |
| 15.2 | The biobehavioral family model | 331 |
| 15.3 | Maternal concerns about talking with teens about birth control | 337 |
| 16.1 | Family environment risk factors and psychosocial consequences of physical child abuse | 348 |
| 16.2 | Family environment risk factors and psychosocial consequences of child sexual abuse | 354 |
| 16.3 | Relational and social context factors in marital violence | 358 |
| 16.4 | Lee's (2009) model of elder abuse | 369 |

List of Tables

| | | |
|------|---|-----|
| 1.1 | Levels of family adaptability in Olson’s Circumplex Model of Family Functioning | 16 |
| 1.2 | Levels of family cohesion in Olson’s Circumplex Model of Family Functioning | 18 |
| 2.1 | Key concepts in family systems theory | 30 |
| 5.1 | Relationship stages, representative scripts, and relationship stage descriptions | 99 |
| 6.1 | Stafford, Dainton, and Hass (2000): Relationship maintenance scale | 120 |
| 6.2 | Gottman’s (1999) Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work | 121 |
| 6.3 | Gottman’s Volatile, Validating, and Conflict-avoiding couples | 136 |
| 6.4 | Fitzpatrick’s Traditional, Independent, and Separate couples | 137 |
| 7.1 | Parenting styles | 146 |
| 7.2 | Steps of emotion coaching | 148 |
| 8.1 | Sibling types in adulthood | 180 |
| 9.1 | Typology of grandparenting styles | 191 |
| 10.1 | Burr and Klein’s conceptual framework of family coping strategies | 220 |
| 11.1 | Carter and McGoldrick’s Stages of the Family Life Cycle with associated social/relational tasks | 227 |
| 13.1 | Baxter et al.’s (1999) taxonomy of stepfamily development trajectories | 278 |
| 13.2 | Gross’s (1987) typology of children’s perceptions of family membership | 279 |
| 13.3 | Schrodrt’s (2006b) Relational typology of stepfamilies | 280 |
| 13.4 | Ahrons and Rodgers’ (1987) typology of post-divorce relationships | 281 |
| 14.1 | Thematic apperception test communication deviance scoring system | 303 |
| 14.2 | Interactional communication deviance scoring system | 304 |
| 14.3 | Summary of family processes implicated in mental health problems | 318 |
| 16.1 | Family violence and abuse concepts and definitions | 347 |
| 17.1 | Examples of programs and techniques to improve family relationships | 372 |

Preface

Few, if any, relationships are more important, salient, long lasting, and central to people's well being than their family relationships. These include spouses, parents, children, and siblings to name but a few. Although these relationships are often defined by genes and institutionalized ceremonies such as marriage, they are built, maintained, and destroyed by communication.

The second edition of *Family Communication* carefully examines state-of-the-art research and theories of family communication and family relationships. In addition to presenting cutting-edge research, we focus as well on classic theories and research findings that have influenced and revolutionized the way scholars conceptualize family interaction. This book was written to fulfill the need for a text that presents a thorough and up to date presentation of scientific research in family communication for both teachers and students of family communication as well as professionals who work with families. Toward that end, we critically selected and evaluated research, and translated that knowledge into a language that is understandable to a broad range of readers. Undergraduate readers should find the information easy to understand, while advanced readers, such as graduate students and professionals, will find it a useful reference to classic and contemporary research on family communication and relationships.

Changes to the second edition take six primary forms. First, each chapter of the new edition is updated with the latest research. To be specific, there are around 2,000 references in the second edition, over 600 of which are new to this edition. *Family Communication* is truly a sourcebook for cutting-edge research on family interaction. Second, the new edition is threaded with recent material on understudied family relationships, such as extended family relationships and gay and lesbian relationships. Third, the revised edition reveals important, recent research on understudied topics in family communication, some of which include the influence of technology on mate selection, negotiating work and family stress, single parenting, cohabitation, elder abuse, forgiveness in marriage, and the links among communication, culture, and mental health. Fourth, the second edition delivers a dramatically revised chapter on parent-child communication (chapter 7), taking a lifespan perspective that helps organize the large body of research in this area. Fifth, the second edition devotes a whole new chapter to extended family relationships, with special focus on grandparent-grandchild relationships, in-law relationships, and adult children and their parents. The sixth major point of revision is that chapter 4 offers an expanded review of family conflict processes, especially in relation to decision making and power.

The second edition of *Family Communication* is divided into four main sections. Part I, "Introducing Family Communication and Basic Family Processes" presents readers with fundamental issues in the study of family communication. These include, for example, questions of how "family" is defined, dominant theories in family science, basic family communication processes (e.g., conflict, decision making, and power) and family interaction forms (e.g., stories, secrets, and rituals). Part II, "Communication in Family Subsystems" explores what is known about communication in different types of families or family relationships. Consequently,

this section contains chapters on topics such as courtship and mate selection, marriage, parent-child, sibling, and extended family relationships. Parts III and IV examine more problematic issues in family communication. Our experience teaching family communication suggests that people are often interested in the topic, not to learn why their family is so happy and content, but rather to gain a better understanding of some problematic issue in their family. Part III therefore covers “Communication During Family Stress.” In this section, we look at theoretical models of how families react to and handle stress, normative and nonnormative family stressors, divorce, remarriage, and the creation of stepfamilies. Throughout this section, we note where “stressors” can actually have positive consequences for the family, and how family communication patterns can mitigate some of the ill effects of family stressors. Finally, in Part IV, “Family Interaction, Health, and Well-being,” we consider the role of family communication in mental and physical health, in addition to the role of communication in family violence and abuse. This section concludes with critical analysis of organized efforts at improving aspects of family communication through therapies, enhancement, and enrichment programs. Readers who wish to learn more about the research methods and measures used to study family will find an overview of family research methodologies in the associated online appendix.

As readers of *Family Communication* will learn, this area of inquiry is truly interdisciplinary. Researchers from the fields of Communication, Family Studies, Nursing, Psychology, Social Work, and Sociology have made remarkable contributions to our current knowledge of family communication processes. Even with our specific emphasis on communication in families, works from these different academic disciplines are evident throughout the book.

We are pleased to acknowledge the support and counsel of our editors at Routledge, Linda Bathgate and Katherine Ghezzi, along with the editorial and production staff members at Routledge for their diligent work on this book. We would also like to thank Tricia Domschke and Peggy Flyntz, at the University of Arizona, as well as Eddie Binder, Paul Chavez, Sergio Juarez, Karina Koerper, Tierney Lara, Kelsey Lenzmeier, Lauren Lopez, Michael Lynch, Vicki Nisbett, Brian Perna, Chris Quay, Mary Jo Ruthven, Jesus Sanchez, and Wade Wiggan at New Mexico State University, for their editorial and production assistance. Both of our respective universities, University of Arizona and New Mexico State University, also deserve credit for their support of this project.

Part I

**Introducing Family
Communication and
Basic Family Processes**

1 Defining Family Communication and Family Functioning

It is often said that there are no individuals in this world, only fragments of families. This idea reflects the fact that interactions and experiences in the family shape the course of our entire lives and are forever carried with us. Shortly after most people physically depart from their family of origin, they initiate a new family of orientation. The family is therefore an unending cycle in which people are constantly involved at multiple levels.

The study of family communication has a long tradition. Some of the most influential works in the field were conducted around the time of World War II and are still influencing the way scholars think about families today. The past 15 years have witnessed more exciting new developments in the field of family communication that are fundamentally reshaping the way people think about functional and dysfunctional family interaction. New developments are providing badly needed information about current family problems. With recent attention and increased focus on problems such as divorce, child abuse, domestic violence, and mental health problems, scholars, therapists, members of the clergy, and students of communication have begun to realize that these problems are in fact *communication* problems. By better understanding the forms, functions, and processes of family communication, people hope to be able to comprehend how and why these problems exist, and perhaps begin to take steps toward preventing them in the future. In addition to concerns about family problems, people also hope to understand issues such as what makes for a happy marriage, what parenting techniques are associated with positive child outcomes, and how to maintain meaningful relationships with family members over the entire lifespan. These too are fundamentally communication issues.

Although personal experience is a valuable teacher, and there is often a kernel of truth in cultural folklore and media portrayals of family, we believe that answers to many pressing questions about family communication are evident, or emerging, from the scientific research conducted by family communication scholars. Indeed, as we illustrate throughout this book, the evidence from scientific studies regarding family interaction sometimes contradicts the messages people receive from the media or their own cultural and family folklore. In this book, we carefully examine state of the art research and theories, as well as classic research and theories, which contribute to the understanding of complex family interactions.

In the past decades, literally thousands, if not millions, of families, parents, stepparents, spouses, children, grandparents, aunts, cousins, and uncles from all walks of life have been studied by family researchers. One primary theme stemming from this research is that there is no “one” version of the American family. If there was one clear, specific recipe for a happy family, there would be little need to study families. In chapter 2, we discuss the concept of equifinality. *Equifinality* refers to the fact that the same end state may be reached in many different ways. For example, there is not one path to a successful marriage. There may be common themes to successful marriages, but there are many different ways couples can go about their courtship, negotiate roles, or deal with conflict and still achieve a successful marriage.

4 *Family Communication and Basic Processes*

One take-home message is that families are diverse. To help describe and explain this diversity, scholars have developed numerous typologies of families and family interaction. We present many of these important typologies throughout the chapters of this book. With diverse families comes diverse family interaction. We also show how scholars have attempted to predict the nature and consequences of various types of family interaction.

In this opening chapter, we address basic questions about families and family interaction. We explore, “What does the word ‘family’ mean?” and “What is a useful definition of family?” This analysis will show there is not one universally accepted definition of family, but each definition has distinct advantages, disadvantages, and implications. We also explore common labels for family forms. In studying definitions of family, we encounter other questions, such as “What tasks and resources are family members expected to perform and provide for one another?” “What kind of interaction defines ‘family?’” and “How is family interaction different from interaction in other relationships?” In answering these questions, we also provide a general definition of communication, and discuss how communication constitutes family and is situated at the heart of family processes. Next, we present demographic data that highlight family trends related to family form and size, and marriage, divorce, and parenting. Although they do not accurately depict all families, the data point to general family trends that we will explore in later chapters of the book. Finally, people often ask, “What makes for optimal family interaction or family functioning?” In this chapter, we present two models of family functioning, Olson’s circumplex model and the McMaster model, that start us on the path toward answering this question. We close the chapter by framing the study of family diversity according to family form, cultural values, and family experiences.

EXAMINING DEFINITIONS OF FAMILY

What is family? Must members be related by blood? Is a civil or religious ceremony necessary or sufficient to the definition of family? Are two students who are in a romantic relationship and who share an apartment a family? Are children necessary or sufficient for family? Must a family have as its core a man and a woman? Is commitment necessary for family? What makes a family group different from any other social group we belong to?

Answers to these questions vary dramatically by individual. There is not one universally accepted definition of family, and it is not likely that we will progress toward one soon (Settles, 1999). Most definitions of family attempt to lay out necessary and sufficient criteria for creating a family. The criteria usually address (1) family form, (2) family functions, and/or (3) family interactions. Issues of *form* address who is “in” the family and by what objective means they are connected (e.g., marriage, blood, adoption). Issues of *function* concentrate on the tasks performed and expected family functions. Issues of *interaction* address the communication processes that connect individuals as family members and show how communication constitutes family. Wamboldt and Reiss (1989) classified definitions of family into three types, distinguished by their attention to form, function, and interaction. The first type, *structural* definitions, defines family by form, while the second and third types, *task-orientation* definitions and *transactional* definitions, define family by function and interaction, respectively.

Defining Family by Form: Structural Definitions

Structural definitions lay out specific criteria that make it clear who is in the family and who is not (Fitzpatrick & Badzinski, 1994). Structural definitions do not depend on the quality of the family interaction or task performance, and they are not dependent on subjective feelings of group identity or affection. Rather they define family simply by form. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2008), family is “a group of two people or more (one of whom is

the householder) related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together” (p. 4). In other words, as long as individuals are related by blood or law and live together, they are considered family. Plausibly, married partners with or without children are a family, or an adult mother and daughter who live together are a family. However, intimate partners without a legally recognized relationship are not counted by the U.S. Census Bureau as family.

One other example of a structural definition of family from David Popenoe argues that family is defined by the presence of a dependent (e.g., a child). According to Popenoe’s definition, family is “a relatively small domestic group of kin (or people in a kin-like relationship) consisting of at least one adult and one dependent person” (1993, p. 529). A more narrow structural definition, Popenoe’s definition does not consider a married or cohabiting couple a family. However, a single parent (whether married previously or not) who lives with one or more dependents is considered a family.

Even with their variety, structural definitions are similar in that they clearly specify who is in the family and who is not by using external, objective criteria. The simplicity of structural definitions makes them appealing to people who are forced to make external decisions about what family is without much information about the inner fabric of the family. Structural definitions have thrived most with demographers, policy makers, and those in the legal arena.

Just as the simplicity of structural definitions seems useful, limitations are very apparent. Can objective criteria define family, or must people turn to more subjective definitions of family based on interaction and function? Perhaps “behavior trumps biology” in defining family (Sappenfield, 2002). For example, an individual may structurally be a member of a family, but because of negative behavior or frequent absence, he or she is not considered by others to be “family.” Furthermore, many common structural definitions have not been adequate enough to encompass some family forms including nonresidential step families, foster families, and gay or lesbian families. Even though families of diverse structure are not considered “family” according to some structural definitions, they may very well be perceived as “family” if they function as “vital emotional units, based primarily on love and affection, that provide psychological security and nurturance to their members” (Peterson & Steinmetz, 1999, p. 3).

Examining Family Forms from a Structural Perspective

Contemporary perceptions of family are increasingly diverse in structural form. Peterson and Steinmetz (1999) suggest that the diversity of family forms is akin to the diversity a biologist finds in a strong and adaptive ecosystem. It is important to have a way of naming and describing the diversity of forms in the ecosystem of families. The labels for these family forms have evolved and are still evolving.

A *family of origin* refers to relatives who are connected by blood or traditional sociolegal contracts such as marriage or adoption. A family of origin typically includes an individual along with his or her parents and siblings. Family of origin refers to the family into which one is born. In contrast, a *family of orientation* is thought of as the family one chooses (e.g., choosing a mate) and/or creates (e.g., creating a child). A *nuclear family* consists of two heterosexual parents and one or more children. As family forms have become more diverse, the percentage of nuclear families has been declining to the point that it is no longer the standard against which other family forms are measured. A *binuclear family* is an original family split into two by divorce. Both families include whatever children were in the original family. One family is headed by the mother who may remain single or remarry, and the other family is headed by the father who may remain single or remarry (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987). A *single-parent family* refers to a parent, who may or may not have been married, and one or more children (DeGenova & Rice, 2002). In a *stepfamily*, “one or both of the married adults have children from a previous union with primary residence in the household” (DeFraun & Olson, 1999, p. 318). For many, the term stepfamily is preferred over “blended family” because “the label

6 *Family Communication and Basic Processes*

[blended family] fosters unrealistic expectations that the new family will quickly and easily blend together into a harmonious family” (DeFrain & Olson, 1999, p. 318).

A *cohabiting family* “consists of two people of the opposite sex living together, sharing sexual expression, who are committed to their relationship without formal legal marriage,” and who may or may not have children (DeGenova & Rice, 2002, p. 4). A *gay or lesbian family* “consists of a couple of the same sex, living together and sharing sexual expression and commitment. Some gay or lesbian families include children, usually the offspring of one of the partners” (DeGenova & Rice, 2002, p. 4). A *childfree family* refers to a married couple who voluntarily decides not to have children. Finally, the term *extended family* is used to describe family groups that include other relatives, whether legal or fictive relatives, beyond the immediate partner or children. These relatives often live in the household or nearby, and in many situations help with childrearing.

Defining Family by Function: Task-orientation Definitions

Task-orientation definitions define family by how the members function or the tasks they perform. Most commonly, task-orientation definitions view family as at least one adult and one or more other persons who perform certain tasks of family life such as socialization, nurturance, development, and financial and emotional support. In one classic example of a task-orientation definition, Lerner and Spanier (1978) define family as a social unit that accepts responsibility for the socialization and nurturance of children. According to this definition, there are no structural limits on the social unit that accepts responsibility for the child. The social unit may involve one mother, two grandparents, or an adult who is not even related to a child biologically or legally.

A decision by the California Supreme Court illustrates that task performance and interaction are often valued more than family structure. The court awarded legal custody of a child to a man, Thomas, who has no biological relation to the child, was never married to the child’s mother, and the mother did not even want him to have anything to do with her son. According to Sappenfield (2002):

Thomas had met the child’s mother when she was already three months pregnant. They moved in together a few months before the birth in 1995, and Thomas’ name was on the birth certificate. After an on-again, off-again relationship [for four years] . . . the biological father nowhere to be found and the mother struggling with drug abuse, Thomas took custody of the boy and sought to become his permanent and legal provider. (p. 2)

Putting unprecedented scrutiny on blood ties, the court ruled that Thomas was indeed the boy’s legal father (with no adoption processes necessary) because he had lived with the child for long periods of time, consistently referred to the child as his son, and offered significant financial and emotional support to the child. Essentially, the California court ruled that an adult could grow into the role of father or mother, because psychosocial caretaking tasks and financial support meant more in the end to the child’s welfare than biological ties. We should point out that in contrast to this example, there are plenty of examples of courts upholding blood ties and essentially devaluing psychosocial caretaking. This is a fear that adoptive parents know all too well.

Clearly, the task-orientation definitions set themselves apart from structural definitions in that they are more flexible. Whoever fulfills the tasks demanded of family members is considered family, regardless of his or her biological or legal connection to the other members. This flexibility is often viewed as an advantage of task-orientation definitions. What becomes problematic for many task-orientation definitions is deciding what tasks *must* be performed in order to term someone family and how well he or she has to perform them to maintain legal family status. Among the various task-orientation definitions, there is not perfect consensus.

Task demands vary by family stage and type. But there are many commonalities in the task-orientation definitions, and we discuss these common expectations for family tasks/functions in the next section.

Common Family Tasks/Functions

Sociologists are credited with first viewing the family as a social institution that functions to meet the needs of the individual and society. *Nurturing* and *socializing* children have traditionally been viewed as the most primary and important functions of the family (Murdock, 1949; Reiss, 1980). This traditional view of course assumes nuclear families as the primary reference point. A more modern view of family functions acknowledges the need to nurture and socialize family members in general, whether they are children, adults, or elderly members, regardless of whether they entered the family through birth, marriage, adoption, or coresidence.

Nurturing family members involves providing basic care, emotional support, and financial support. Upon birth and for many years beyond, people rely on their families for food, clothing, and shelter. Emotional support provides family members with a sense of belonging, love, affection, kinship, companionship, and acceptance. Provision of at least basic care and support is not only a social and moral expectation, but also a legal obligation because courts can take a child away from a family or certain family members if they do not provide sufficient care. Norms regarding parental responsibility for provision of care often become complicated after divorce. Divorcees who actively coparent must negotiate how to share the parenting tasks. Nearly 50% of nonresidential, divorced parents have no contact with their children, and less than 15% have weekly contact (Ganong & Coleman, 1999; Seltzer, 1991). Child support laws attempt to spell out some expectations for nonresidential parents. However, some divorced parents fail to pay child support or do so insufficiently. A handful of states have laws requiring stepparents to provide financial assistance to their stepchildren (Fine & Fine, 1992) and, in a few cases, stepparents have been legally required to pay postdivorce child support to stepchildren (Ganong & Coleman, 1999).

Families are expected, though not legally obligated, to socialize members. Young children usually learn basic manners and social skills from their parents. Prior to formal education, most young children learn from their family to recite their ABCs, to count, or to distinguish and name colors. Recreation is even a form of socialization in which children learn important roles for functioning inside and outside the family. Parents also pass on a variety of cultural traditions and values, including cultural stories, holiday rituals, political ideologies, or religious convictions. In addition, the family encourages its members to adapt to changes in society. Children even socialize parents, in what Peterson and Hann (1999) term *reciprocal socialization*. For example, children may teach parents about societal advances in technology. Children may even help other family members adapt to larger changes in societal values, such as society's redefined roles of women or revised views about civil rights or sexual orientation.

Not all families fulfill these functions of care and socialization. As a result, educational, governmental, and religious organizations have taken on some obligations and duties once left to the family (Ganong & Coleman, 1999; Hareven, 1991). Many children rely exclusively on their school for breakfast and lunch, before and after school care, emotional support, not to mention socialization and intellectual development. The debate between public versus private responsibility for the young and the elderly remains charged.

Defining Family by Interaction: Transactional Definitions

Transactional definitions represent a third approach to defining family, and they give central importance to the communication among individuals and the subjective feelings generated by interaction. Burgess and Locke (1953) proposed one of the first transactional definitions

8 *Family Communication and Basic Processes*

when they defined family as “a unit of interacting personalities.” Naturally, many family communication scholars favor the transactional definitions. Transactional definitions do not intend to ignore the tasks demanded of family members. Rather, they *extend* the task-orientation definitions, arguing that a family is more than a group of people who performs certain tasks for one another. Although the distinction is not perfect, task-orientation definitions place more emphasis on the instrumental role of family, and transactional definitions highlight the interaction in the family. According to transactional definitions, what makes a group of people a family is that they perform their tasks within a certain system of interaction. Describing the interaction and subjective feelings that define the family system, Wamboldt and Reiss (1989) define family as “a group of intimates [whose interaction generates] a sense of home and group identity; complete with strong ties of loyalty and emotion, and an experience of a history and a future” (p. 728). The meaning and boundaries of family are often symbolized through family stories, family rituals, and other symbolic communication. Overall, the focus is not on the family’s task performance, but on the interaction *among* communicators (Whitchurch & Dickson, 1999). Interaction among family members according to the transactional perspective is characterized by the following: intimacy, interdependence, commitment, feelings of family identity, emotional ties, self-defined symbols and boundaries for family membership, and an ongoing history and future.

An advantage of task-orientation and transactional definitions is that they are more fluid and broad than most structural definitions. They allow us to name as family groups of people who traditionally would not be considered family. Furthermore, it is true that an individual’s well-being is often more related to the psychosocial tasks performed by those around them as well as subjective feelings of intimacy and family identity, rather than biological ties. The advantage of these definitions is simultaneously a disadvantage. Task-orientation definitions and transactional definitions are too broad for some purposes. For example, even people who are not “family” may fulfill psychosocial caretaking tasks, for example, teachers, babysitters, close friends. And even people who are not “family” may generate subjective feelings of home, identity, loyalty, strong emotion, and an experience of history and future, for example, fraternities/sororities, religious groups, etc. Compared to structural definitions, psychosocial definitions imply that family is more voluntary in nature. This voluntary nature provides freedom, but at what cost? To what extent can people choose the tasks and subjective feelings that define family? For example, is it acceptable not to take on the task of caring for an older family member just because one does not feel an emotional connection with him/her? Is it acceptable to deny someone family status because one does not have feelings of home or loyalty with them?

After this discussion of various definitions, readers may wonder how the authors define family. Even though we feel that simple definitions of family are useful in some circumstances, we relied on a multifaceted definition of family to guide our choices about the type of research to include in this book. We prefer DeGenova and Rice’s (2002) definition, which refers to structural, task-orientation, and transactional components in one definition. According to DeGenova and Rice, “family is any group of persons united by the ties of marriage, blood, or adoption, or any sexually expressive relationship, in which (1) the adults cooperate financially for their mutual support, (2) the people are committed to one another in an intimate interpersonal relationship, and (3) the members see their individual identities as importantly attached to the group with an identity of its own” (p. 2). Still, we are careful to note that there is not one universally accepted definition of family, and for the time being, there may be benefits to a variety of definitions.

Implications of Family Definitions: Legal, Political, and Scientific Perspectives

Why do we need to define family anyway? On one hand it seems that each individual should define for himself or herself what family is. However, people are continually motivated to

define family for scientific, political, legal, and social reasons. For instance, scientists must take the task of defining family seriously, because what is known about the dynamics of families and treatment of perceived problems of families is highly influenced by one's definitions and theoretical lens (Settles, 1999, p. 147). McHale and Grolnick (2002) argue that family scholars have frequently used structural definitions with a nucleocentric bias to define family, resulting in an overwhelming number of studies of intact heterosexual couples raising children in nuclear families. However, as researchers grapple with how to broaden their definitions of family, they are reminded that any good scientific definition must specify what something is and what it is not. Definitions that are too broad are useless for scientific purposes.

Defining family is also important for political and legal reasons, because "a unit defined as family may be in line to receive such special benefits as housing, health care, and sick leave" (Popenoe, 1993, p. 529). In other words, "families will be acknowledged or forgotten as they are accorded family status" (Settles, 1999, p. 147). When money is involved, specific definitions of family become especially important. A good number of high profile legal cases depict the struggle that often develops when a wealthy person dies and relatives and former partners battle over inheritance. Knowing how to define family becomes important in other legal decisions regarding protection of contractual relationships between cohabitants, biotechnological developments such as in vitro fertilization and surrogate parenthood, visitation rights of grandparents, or land-use laws that recognize family-like living arrangements such as group homes within the meaning of "single family" land use (Melton & Wilcox, 1989). Holtzman (2006) makes the case, with respect to child custody, that expanding legally recognized definitions of family still may not be enough of a legal change to protect children's attachment relationships. More than any other time in history, family scholars are significantly influencing legal and political decisions regarding family.

Implications of Family Definitions: Lay Perspectives

Finally, for practical reasons, people want to be able to explain to others who is in their family. Many people have very complicated answers to seemingly simple questions about who their family is. Even in personal conversations, people often use phrases such as "they are like family to me" to describe close friends, and people commonly distinguish, for example, their biological father from the person they really consider to be their "dad."

In a study of children's perceptions of family, Newman, Roberts, and Syré (1993) explored whether children define family by form, function, interaction, or all three. They asked children who ranged in age groups of 4–6, 7–9, 10–12, 13–15, and university age, "If a person [from another planet] asked you, what would you say to help him or her figure out what a family is?" (Newman et al., 1993, p. 954). Responses were coded to determine how many made reference to biological ties (e.g., people bonded through blood relations), legal ties (e.g., a man and a woman who are married), coresidence (e.g., people with whom you live), affective ties (e.g., people who love each other), shared activities (e.g., people with whom you eat your meals), family roles (e.g., a dad, mom, brother, or sister), or other (e.g., a whole bunch of people). The children defined family in several ways. However, affective ties were most frequently mentioned by participants (60%), while coresidence was second most frequently mentioned (38%). Responses varied by age, with older children more likely to mention the affective criterion. Overall, this study indicates that communication, as manifested in affective ties, may do more to constitute lay perceptions of family than structural criteria.

However, other research illustrates the strong hinge that structural criteria still hold in lay perceptions of family. This is played out in Holtzman's (2008) clever study of lay perceptions of family. Holtzman asked university students to respond to the following question, "You discover your wonderful one-year-old child is, because of a mix-up at the hospital, not yours. Would you want to exchange the child to try to correct the mistake?" (p. 168).

10 *Family Communication and Basic Processes*

Students' responses reflected a desire to honor both traditional, structural definitions, and psychosocial definitions, as a majority of students struggled to find some balance in their decision (e.g., finding a way to see both children). However, for the students who reached a final conclusion, the decisions favored traditional, structural definitions slightly more (e.g., stressing the physical, biological connection between parent and child). Similarly, when Baxter et al. (2009) asked people to determine whether various units of people had family status or not, they found that the presence of certain structural features increased the likelihood that people would label a group as having family status. These structural features included: "the presence of children, intactness (i.e., the absence of dissolution or separation), shared residential status (as opposed to geographic separation), heterosexual orientation (as opposed to homosexual orientation), institutionalization through marriage (as opposed to cohabitation), and the presence of blood relations (as opposed to fictive relations)" (Baxter et al., 2009, p. 186). Yet when they examined whether the amount of communication contact (frequent vs. limited) affected perceptions of family status, Baxter et al. found that the presence of frequent communication increased perceptions of family status regardless of how the units of people were structured.

A critical point of discussion in the Baxter et al. (2009) study revolves around how people use labels to communicatively construct family. Their argument is that people are highly attuned to the privilege and respect that society offers to those who are "family" or better yet, to "normal" families. To support this point, they question why people feel compelled to legitimize their family status with labels and explanations. For example, "when a childless married couple feels obligated to give an account to others of why they are childless, they are acting on their perception that the presence of children is an important criterion for family status" (Baxter et al., 2009, p. 186). In another illustration, people are compelled to say "he is like my dad" or "she is like my sister" even when there is no legal or biological tie. Not only do people define family to fit their own needs, but they manipulate labels and offer accounts to serve their interests. This is exhibited in Bailey's (2007) study regarding how divorced nonresidential parents define family. She discovered a difficult tension: The nonresidential parents wanted to feel that they were still a part of their children's family, but the external label of "visiting parent" matched with the lack of involvement in the child's daily activities and psychosocial caretaking seemed contradictory to being in the family. Bailey argues that divorced nonresidential parents cope with this tension by creating a new definition of family that accounts for their post-divorce experience.

FAMILY TRENDS AND DEMOGRAPHICS

It is important to understand the demographic trends that are influenced by and influence family communication. Events such as the birth of a child or the death of a family member fundamentally reshape interaction in the family system. Processes such as marriage and divorce are essentially communication processes. Rich demographic resources like the U.S. Census Bureau help describe frequencies and trends regarding family form, size, and marriage, divorce, and parenting (Rosenthal, 2001).

Family Size Trends

After World War II, birthrates climbed to a high level and remained high for the next 20 years (from 1945 to 1965), producing a group of people termed baby boomers. Since the baby boomer era, birthrates have fallen. Delays in marriage, increases in voluntary childlessness, and the economic implications of raising children are some of the factors that contribute to smaller family sizes. From 1970 to 2003, the percentage of family groups that had four or more children decreased from 17% to 5% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). According to Schwede (2007) the average U.S. family size is 3.14. Figure 1.1 depicts declines in household size

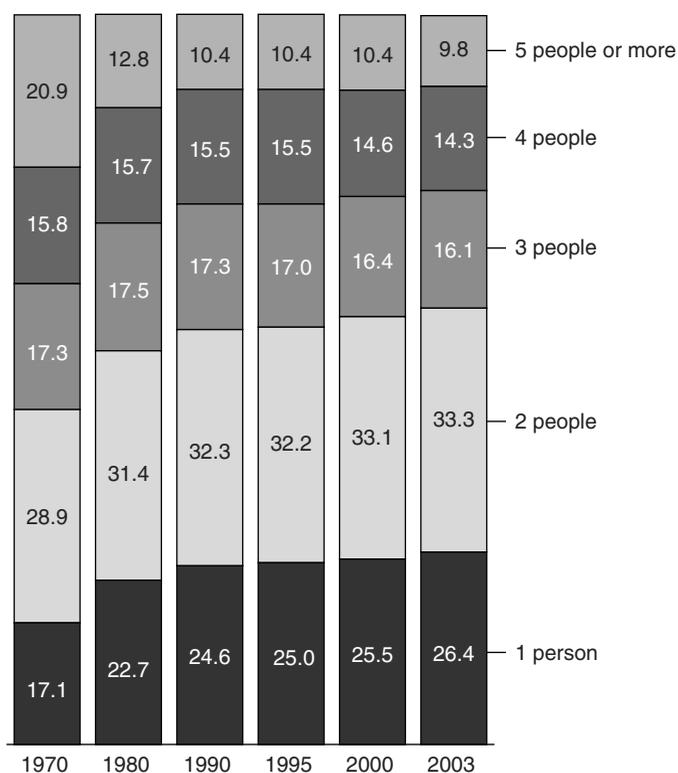


Figure 1.1 Household size between 1970 and 2003. From *Households by Size: Selected Years, 1970 to 2003*: [Figure 3] by U.S. Census Bureau. (2004). *America's families and living arrangements: 2003 Population characteristics*. World Wide Web: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/p20-553.pdf>.

Note. Numbers within figure are percentage distribution.

between 1970 and 2003. (Although keep in mind that the terms household and family are not synonymous. A household is simply one or more persons living together in a housing unit, and not all households are *family* households.)

Family size decreases when adult children depart from home, however the timing of these departures depends heavily on education and work. In 2003, 46% of women and 55% of men aged 18–24 lived at home with one or both of their parents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Some of these 18–24 year olds may have even departed from home for education and work, but then returned home for a short period, as a means of dealing with economic pressures (Mitchell & Gee, 1996). Even if these young adults return home, most do not stay long. In 2000, 28% of unmarried men and 36% of unmarried women between ages 20–29 headed their own household. In the early part of the 20th century, most unmarried young adults lived with their parents until they were married—to be specific, only 5% of unmarried young adults between the ages 20–29 headed their own households in the first half of the 20th century (Rosenfeld, 2007; see also Cherlin, 2010). Some young adults who venture out to live alone or to live with new partners will eventually experience what it is like to have their parents move in with them. The number of parents living in the homes of their adult children increased by 67% from 2000 to 2007 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

Marriage Trends

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2001), “marriage is still very much a part of American life” (p. 10). By age 65, 94% of men and women in the U.S. have been married (U.S. Census

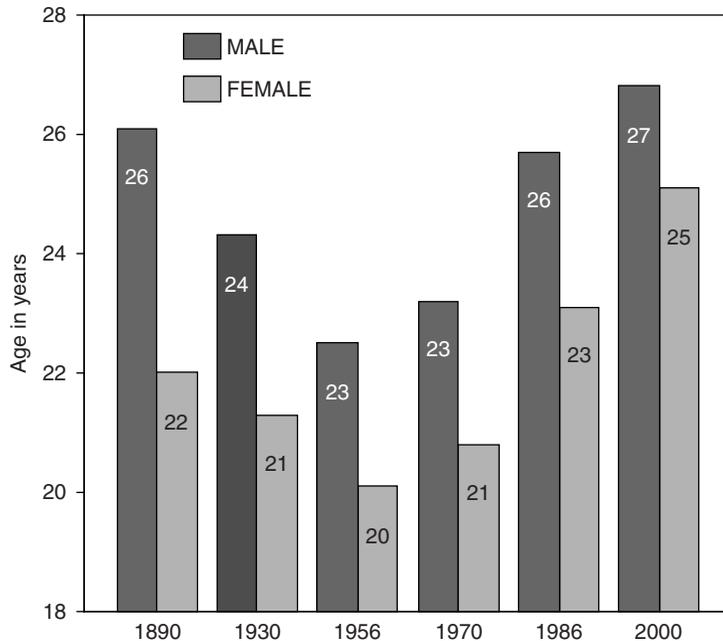


Figure 1.2 Age at first marriage by year and sex. Adapted from *Estimated Median Age at First Marriage, by Sex: 1890 to the Present: January 1999* [Table MS-2] by U.S. Census Bureau (1999, January). World Wide Web: <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/ms-la/tabms-2.txt> and *Median Age at First Marriage of the Population 15 Years and Over by Sex: Selected Years, 1970 to 2000* [Figure 3] by U.S. Census Bureau, *America's Families and Living Arrangements*. (2001, June). World Wide Web: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/p20-537.pdf>.

Bureau, 2005). However, since 1970, people have been delaying marriage. The proportion of women 20–24 years old who had never married doubled between 1970 and 2000, from 36% to 73%. During that same time, the number of never married women between the ages 30–34 tripled, from 6% to 22%. Delays in marriage have sharply increased for men as well. The number of unmarried men between 20 and 24 rose from 55% in 1970 to 84% in 2000. For men aged 30–34, the never married group jumped from 9% to 30%. According to Cherlin's summary, "college educated [people] are more likely to ever marry than are the less educated, but they delay marrying more" (2010, p. 404). Figure 1.2 depicts fluctuations in age at first marriage over the last century. Age at first marriage was lowest for both men and women in 1956—at ages 22.5 and 20.1, respectively. Age at first marriage in 2008 was 27.4 for men and 25.6 for women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Note that for men, the age at first marriage in 1890, 26.1, is not so different from age at first marriage in 2008, 27.4.

In 2003, 4.27% of all households were termed "unmarried-partner households" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). This category could include cohabiting couples, whether homosexual or heterosexual. However, the U.S. Census Bureau speculates that this number underrepresents the true number of heterosexual cohabiting couples or gay and lesbian couples, because such persons are sometimes reluctant to classify themselves and may describe themselves as friends or roommates. Even so, between 1980 and 1993, the known number of cohabiting couples doubled to nearly 4 million (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). The Centers for Disease Control estimates that by age 30 about half of women in the U.S. have cohabited outside marriage (2002). Data on cohabitation and marriage have an interesting relationship. Increasing cohabitation rates appear to be offsetting declining rates in marriage. Although people are delaying marriage, they are not, to the same degree, delaying the age at which they first enter a cohabiting union. In addition, nearly half of all first marriages begin with cohabitation (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991).

Death, Divorce, and Remarriage Trends

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2009) reports that life expectancy at birth for the population in 2007 reached a record high of 75.3 years for men and 80.4 years for women. Even though the gap between male and female life expectancy has been decreasing since 1979, women can still expect to live 5.1 years longer than men. “Among people 70 years and over, 23% of men and 56% of women had ever been widowed” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Because women, on average, marry older men (by 2–3 years) and live longer (by about 5 years), women can expect to live the last 7–8 years of their lives as a widow.

Divorce causes even more marital dissolutions than death. Nearly half of all marriages initiated in recent years will end in divorce. In chapter 12, we further discuss trends in divorce and the dramatic increase in divorce rates over the last 30–40 years, though the divorce rate appears to have stabilized or even declined slightly in recent years. Most divorced people and many widowed individuals remarry. As a result, almost half of all marriages are remarriages for one or both partners, and many of these remarriages involve children from one or both partners (Bumpass, Sweet, & Martin, 1990; Ganong & Coleman, 1999). Remarriage often happens quickly, with the median number of years between divorce and remarriage at 3 years for women and 4 years for men (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001).

Divorce and remarriage restructure families. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2004), the proportion of married couple households with their own children declined from 40% of all U.S. households in 1970 to 23% in 2003. For this reason, Peterson and Steinmetz (1999) argue that “it makes no sense to continually ‘normalize’ a form of the family [the nuclear family] that is attainable only by a minority and may have been dominant only briefly in our history” (p. 2). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2004), single-mother families increased from 3 million in 1970 to 10 million in 2003, and single-father families are up from less than half a million in 1970 to 2 million in 2003. Another way to look at this is that the percentage of single-parent families grew to 32% in 2003 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). The U.S. Census Bureau (2008) estimated that in 2004, 5% of children under 18 lived with a cohabiting parent, though this estimate is likely low given many people do not report cohabitants. Finally, 1 in 10 children who presently lived with two parents lived with a step or adoptive parent in 2004 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Before reaching adulthood, 30% of all children are estimated to live with a stepparent (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995).

DEFINING COMMUNICATION AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS

Like definitions of family, there are numerous definitions of communication that reflect diverse perspectives in the communication discipline. We prefer a definition of communication that highlights many of the basic issues addressed by communication theorists: *Communication is a transactional process in which individuals create, share, and regulate meaning.*

Communication scholars have long been interested in the means by which humans communicate. Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) proposed that humans use both digital and analogic codes to communicate. In *digital codes*, meaning is conveyed symbolically. *Symbols* are arbitrary and conventional units of meaning. In other words, there is no necessary relationship between the symbol and the thing or idea that the symbol represents. Words and numbers are two common examples of symbols. As long as members of a language community agree that the word “hungry” represents that physical state, then it becomes a symbol. People simply chose the sounds produced by those letters to stand for that physical state. Members of a language community use the same symbols and recognize them as conventional units of meaning. One assumption inherent in family communication research is that each family is a unique mini-culture (Whitchurch & Dickson, 1999). Minicultures develop their own symbols. The meaning assigned to those symbols is only understood by those who are a part of

the miniculture. For example, family minicultures have nicknames, family jokes, or references that only members of the family understand.

Analogic codes communicate meaning by being similar to what they convey. The code is the thing, not a distant representation of the thing. Thus, there is a direct relationship between the code and the meaning expressed. For example, a no smoking sign that uses an analogic code would show a picture of a cigarette with a diagonal line through the cigarette to indicate that cigarettes are not allowed. In contrast, a no smoking sign in a digital code would simply read “no smoking,” relying on symbolic words. Many nonverbal behaviors are analogic codes. For example, facial movements can be the expressions of real emotions, not just a distant representation of an emotion. A great deal of family communication occurs through nonverbal analogic codes. Parents communicate with their newborn infants almost entirely through analogic codes (e.g., the cry or yawn of a baby), and even as their children age, some parents become quite skilled at decoding their child’s expressions (e.g., knowing the child is distressed by the expression on his or her face).

But is all behavior communication? Watzlawick et al. (1967) originally proposed, “one cannot not communicate.” That is, every behavior is communicative. Indeed in families, members may know each other so well that they can determine the intent behind many behaviors, or they think they can. Bavelas (1990) later conceded that all behavior is not communicative, though it may have *informative value* (p. 599). Thus, one individual’s interpretation is not the same as communication. Communication is a mutual process that extends beyond one person’s interpretations. Communication relies on intersubjectivity. *Intersubjectivity* refers to shared meaning, or a state where a person understands the other and is understood by the other. In families, a great deal of history and common experience allows individuals to reach a level of intersubjectivity that they would not otherwise achieve in more casual relationships. Long-time married couples often report that they achieve this intersubjectivity—they understand what their partners are thinking and feeling—even when few, if any, words are exchanged. However, even couples that know each other well often resort to lengthy exchanges in order to understand each other. And sometimes they never understand each other, and simply have to do the best job they can at attempting to understand and coordinate their behavior (Pearce, 1976).

The success of communication is dependent on *feedback*, or the interpretations and evaluations one receives about the message. Feedback indicates that it is possible and in fact common for people to disagree about the meaning of any given symbol. As illustrated in subsequent chapters on marital communication or parent–child communication, family members often become confused about what other members “meant” by their verbal or nonverbal behavior. For example, parents may define a “fun” activity very differently than their children, and they eventually are prompted by the child to clarify and regulate new, shared meaning. Watzlawick et al. (1967) term this process *reframing*, whereby family members step outside the situation or the norms of the family system and look at things in a new light.

Watzlawick et al. (1967) proposed another axiom that is central to the study of family communication: “Every communication has a content and relationship aspect such that the latter classifies the former and is therefore a metacommunication” (p. 54). *Content messages* refer to what is said, and *relationship messages* refer to how it is said and the impact it has on the relationship. Relationship messages are often communicated through nonverbal behavior. To Watzlawick et al., relationship messages are always most important. Much of the study of family communication is the study of relationship messages. Marital partners in conflict may find they underestimated or overestimated the amount of impact that their communication had on their partner. Parents may offer the same content message to two children, but the relationship message is sent or interpreted differently by each child. *Metacommunication*, then, refers to communication about communication, where the communicators say “This is how I see myself . . . this is how I see you . . . this is how I see you seeing me” (Watzlawick et al.,

1967, p. 54). Metacommunication is an important skill for families, particularly when things go wrong in family communication. In distressed family relationships, metacommunication is typically absent or constant (i.e., the members are constantly battling over interpretations of content or the nature of the relationship).

Our definition of communication also implies that people create, share, and regulate meaning in a transactional process. As a process, communication is an ongoing, complex, changing activity (Dance, 1967). Every family's communication is continuous, with a unique history, present, and future. Past experiences in the family clearly influence present interactions. Communication defines the family's present reality and constructs family relationships. Families are constantly renegotiating their reality into the future. Rather than attempting to understand the family from one specific instance of communication or from one family member, the family should be understood as a whole. Because most families are not just dyadic relationships, the transactional process is complex. In this relatively new area of family communication, many scholars who originated from the area of interpersonal communication naturally focused most of their attention on various family dyads (e.g., parent-child communication, marital communication) (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). For sure, family communication research has and still does benefit from this tradition. Thanks to the nudging of scholars from the area of group communication, family communication scholars today are increasingly focusing on whole family interactions (Socha, 1999). Communication, even if just between a dyad, always occurs in a whole family system. Though some believe that family communication is simply the study of communication in the context of families, most family scholars assert "the family is the central organizing construct of study, not a context for communication" (Whitchurch & Dickson, 1999, p. 690).

MODELS OF FAMILY FUNCTIONING

Olson's Circumplex Model

Perhaps the premier model of family functioning was developed by family systems theorist David Olson (Olson, 1993; Olson, Sprenkle, & Russell, 1979). Olson suggested that there are two primary dimensions of family behavior that are vital to their functioning. These are termed adaptability and cohesion. A third dimension of family behavior, communication, is presumed to allow families to change their degree of adaptability and cohesion in response to the demands they face.

The *adaptability* dimension of family behavior refers to "the ability of a marital/family system to change its power structure, role relationships, and relationship rules in response to situational and developmental stress" (Olson et al., 1979, p. 12). More recently, Olson has referred to this dimension of family behavior as "flexibility" (Olson, 1993). Families that are highly adaptive change easily in response to environmental demands. Families with low adaptability have a fixed or invariant style of functioning and interacting. In times of crisis or bounty, their behavior remains fairly constant. Family adaptability is manifested in how assertive family members are with each other, the amount of control in the family, family discipline practices, negotiation, how rigidly family roles are adhered to, and the nature and enforcement of rules in the family. In the circumplex model, there are four different levels of family functioning that represent different points on the highly adaptable to nonadaptable continuum. Running from low to high adaptability, these include the rigid, structured, flexible, and chaotic families. A profile of such families, as a function of the different family adaptability behaviors, is presented in Table 1.1. According to Olson, the midlevel or balanced families (i.e., flexible or structured) are the most functional, whereas extreme families (i.e., chaotic or rigid) are assumed to be the least functional. This is because rigid families are unable to change their power structure and interaction patterns to appropriately meet the demands and challenges they face. At the same

Table 1.1 Levels of family adaptability in Olson's Circumplex Model of Family Functioning

| | <i>CHAOTIC</i> (<i>extreme adaptability</i>) | <i>FLEXIBLE</i> (<i>high adaptability</i>) | <i>STRUCTURED</i> (<i>mod.-low adaptability</i>) | <i>RIGID</i> (<i>no adaptability</i>) |
|---------------------------|--|--|---|---|
| Assertiveness/Passiveness | Opposite styles (rules unclear) | Generally assertive | Generally assertive | Opposite styles (vacillates) |
| Control | Limited leadership | Egalitarian (fluid leadership) | Democratic with clear leader | Authoritarian leadership |
| Discipline | Lenient | Democratic with unpredictable consequences | Democratic with predictable consequences | Autocratic and overly strict |
| Negotiation | Endless negotiation and poor problem-solving | Good negotiation and problem solving | Good problem solving and rules for negotiation | Limited negotiation and poor problem solving |
| Roles | Dramatic role shifts | More fluid family roles | More defined family roles | Rigid roles (stereotyped) |
| Rules | Dramatic rule shifts and many implicit rules; rules arbitrarily enforced | Rule changes and more implicit than explicit rules | Few rule changes, mostly explicit rules; rules enforced | Rigid, extreme rules; rules strictly enforced |

Note. From Olson, D.H. (1993). Circumplex model of marital and family systems: Assessing family functioning. In F. Walsh (Ed.), *Normal family processes* (2nd ed., pp. 104–137). New York: Guilford. Reprinted with permission.

time, chaotic families represent something of a free-for-all with no clear idea on any given day of who is in charge or who is occupying what roles.

The second major dimension of family behavior in Olson's circumplex model is family *cohesion*. This dimension represents "the emotional bonding members have with one another and the degree of individual autonomy a person experiences in the family system" (Olson et al., 1979, p. 5). Like family adaptability, the family's cohesion is evident in a number of family behaviors that include their emotional bonding to each other, the regulation and maintenance of boundaries, the nature of family coalitions, how the family shares time and space, family versus individual friends, and family decision making patterns. Very cohesive families spend maximum time together, make decisions as a family, and are strongly bonded to each other emotionally. Noncohesive families tend to have members who "do their own thing," have their own friends, spend little time together, and maintain more personal than shared family space. As with the adaptability dimension, Olson and his colleague suggest that there are four different family types on the cohesion dimension that represent different points on the continuum. From low to high cohesion, these family types are: disengaged, separated, connected, and enmeshed. A profile of such families, as a function of the different family cohesion behaviors, is presented in Table 1.2. Once again, Olson argues that it is the mid-level or balanced families (i.e., separated or connected) who are the most functional, with the extreme level families (i.e., disengaged and enmeshed) being the least functional. The reasoning is that disengaged families exhibit insufficient bonding to each other and excessive autonomy from the family. The enmeshed families on the other hand exhibit extreme emotional bonding to each other, overidentification with the family, blurred boundaries, and insufficient autonomy to function effectively outside of the family context.

The communication that takes place between family members is considered to be a third important aspect of family behavior. In the circumplex model, family communication is seen as a *facilitating dimension*. By this Olson and his colleagues mean that communication allows the family members to move on the adaptability and cohesion dimensions. As families grow, develop, and change it is often necessary for them to adjust their adaptability and cohesion in order to maintain optimal functioning. Positive communication behaviors such as self-disclosure, clarity, attentive listening, demonstration of empathy, and staying on topic are assumed to facilitate such adjustments in adaptability and cohesion (Olson, 1993). In research on specific family communication dimensions that affect family functioning, Schrodt (2005) found that perceptions of family expressiveness, the free and open exchange of ideas and feelings, are positively associated with family functioning. On the other hand, negative family communication behaviors such as criticism, denial of feelings, excessive conflict, and failure to listen are assumed to impede the family's movement on the adaptability and cohesion dimensions. Specifically, Schrodt found that perceptions of conflict avoidance and structural traditionalism (i.e., communication that reflects strongly defined role expectations and enforces societal expectations) were inversely related to family functioning. Consequently, when it would be optimal for families to alter their adaptability or cohesion, they remain stuck at one point on the continuum, unable to change their behavior. This contributes to dysfunctional responses to environmental stressors.

By combining the adaptability (or flexibility) and cohesion dimensions, it is possible to plot families on a two dimensional space. This plot, depicted in Figure 1.3, constitutes the Circumplex Model of Family Functioning. Families who could be plotted on the periphery of the circumplex model are considered to be *extreme* families. That is to say that they have either very high or very low adaptability and/or cohesion. These are assumed to be the least functional families. Families whose behavior places them somewhat closer to the middle of the circumplex model are characterized as *mid-range* families. These families are moderately functional because they are balanced on at least one of the two dimensions of family behavior. Finally, the families whose behavior locates them at the center of the circumplex model

Table 1.2 Levels of family cohesion in Olson's Circumplex Model of Family Functioning

| CONCEPTS | DISENGAGED (no cohesion) | SEPARATED (low-mod. cohesion) | CONNECTED (mod.-high cohesion) | ENMESHED (extreme cohesion) |
|------------------------------|---|--|---|---|
| Emotional bonding | Independent (low) | Low-moderate | High-moderate | Dependent (high) |
| Internal/external boundaries | Open external boundaries | Open internal boundaries | Closed external boundaries | Blurred internal boundaries |
| Coalition | Weak coalition (family scapegoat) | Clear marital coalition (husband-wife stronger) | Strong marital coalition (united front) | Strong parent-child coalition |
| Time | Maximum time away from family | Time alone (space) & time together important. | Time together more important than space | Maximum time together |
| Space | Maximum separate physical space | Maintain private space and family space | Maximum family space and minimum private space | Minimum private space |
| Friends | Few family friends, many individual friends | Some family and individual friends | More time with family friends—some individual | Family friends more important; few individual friends |
| Decision making | Individual decisions | Most decisions individual-based; able to make joint family decisions | Individual decisions are shared; made with family interests in mind | All decisions made by family |

Note. From Olson, D.H., Sprenkle, D.H., & Russell, C.S. (1979). Circumplex model of marital and family systems: Cohesion and adaptability dimensions, family types, and clinical applications. *Family Process, 18*, 3-28. Reprinted with permission.

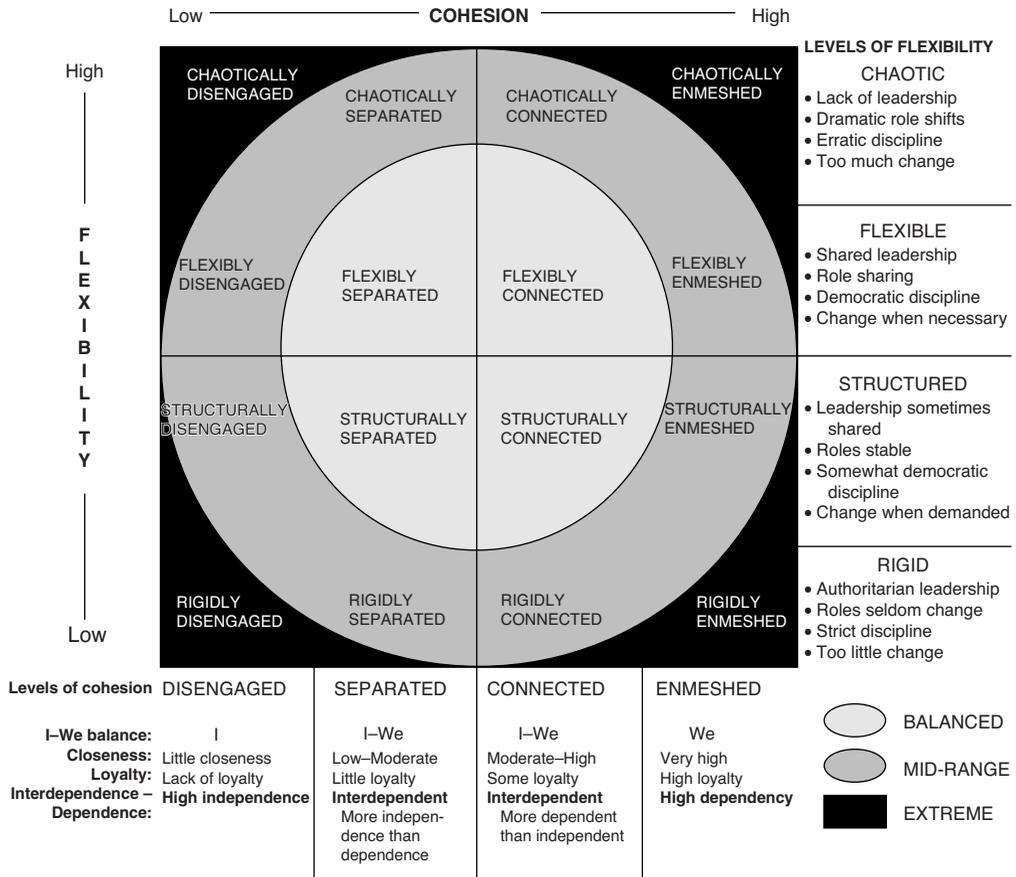


Figure 1.3 The Circumplex Model of Family Functioning.

Note. From Olson, D.H. (1993). Circumplex model of marital and family systems: Assessing family functioning. In F. Walsh (Ed.), *Normal family processes* (2nd ed., pp. 104–137). New York: Guilford. Reprinted with permission.

are considered to be the most functional. Their location at the center indicates that they are balanced on both dimensions of family behavior.

It is important to bear in mind that families can change their position on the circumplex as they evolve over time (Olson, 1993). In fact, the most functional families will alter their adaptability and cohesion to levels that are most appropriate to their stage of the family life cycle. For example, newlywed couples may be extremely high on the cohesion dimension but somewhat low on the adaptability dimension. However, as time passes and they have children, cohesion levels may naturally decline and adaptability levels may increase substantially. The presence of multiple children in the home ordinarily calls for substantial adaptability in order to keep the family functioning at an appropriate level. Keep in mind that it is the family’s positive communication skills that are hypothesized to allow for movement on the adaptability and cohesion dimensions. This is an important ability for maintaining family functioning during times of stress (see chapter 10 for more details on the circumplex model and family stress).

In some of the original analyses of the circumplex model, Olson and his colleagues found that balanced or mid-range families had the highest level of family functioning (e.g., Olson et al., 1979; Russell, 1979). Further evidence for this curvilinear (i.e., inverted U) relationship between adaptability or cohesion and family functioning has been documented in research

conducted since then (e.g., Kawash & Kozeluk, 1990; Olson, 2000; Rodick, Henggeler, & Hanson, 1986; Thomas & Olson, 1993; Yahav, 2002). However, there is also some evidence to suggest that there is a linear relationship among adaptability, cohesion, and positive family outcomes (Farrell & Barnes, 1993; James & Hunsley, 1995; Perosa & Perosa, 2001; Shields & Clark, 1995). Especially for family cohesion, some research shows that more is better. At the present time, scientists do not completely agree on the exact nature of the relationship among adaptability, cohesion, and family functioning. It may be that the measures of family cohesion, for example, do not effectively discriminate between connected and enmeshed families. Another possibility is that enmeshed families may be rare in our society, so they may not show up in research studies very often. This could make it look like more cohesion is better for family functioning. Yet another idea is that high family cohesion has both positive and negative effects, depending on the context. While a distinctively high level of cohesion within many Hispanic families has been thought of as a protective factor against external stressors, high cohesion may also thwart the acculturation process (Rivera, Guarnaccia, Mulvaney-Day, Lin, Torres, & Alegria, 2008). We suspect that, at least in theory, families with extraordinarily high levels of cohesion probably do not function as well as those that are moderate in cohesion. The confused roles and boundaries that are associated with very high cohesion, the failure to develop a unique identity apart from the family, and the lack of friends aside from “family friends” would ordinarily not be conducive for optimal family outcomes.

The McMaster Model of Family Functioning

Unlike Olson’s circumplex model that plots family functioning in a two-dimensional space, the McMaster Model of Family Functioning (Epstein, Bishop, & Levin, 1978) is based on six conceptual dimensions of family functionality. Even though there are many more dimensions in the McMaster model, many of them are closely related to adaptability and cohesion (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1993), so it is more similar to Olson’s circumplex model than it may appear at first glance. The McMaster model was developed with attention to clinical application. One of the underlying philosophies of the McMaster model is that family functioning is better described by transactional and systematic properties of the family as opposed to intrapsychic characteristics of individual family members. Consequently, family assessment from the perspective of the McMaster Model focuses on structural and organizational properties of the family, along with appraisals of the transactions between family members (Epstein, Baldwin, & Bishop, 1983).

The first dimension of the McMaster Model of Family Functioning is *problem solving*, which is the family’s ability to resolve issues that threaten their functional capacity. It is assumed that the most functional families work through common stages of problem solving such as identifying the problem, deciding on alternative solutions, and monitoring actions. Like Olson’s model, the McMaster model has a *communication* dimension. This is the exchange of information between family members in a way that is both clear and direct. This dimension of family behavior is measured in the McMaster model with items such as “People come right out and say things instead of hinting at them,” “We are frank with each other,” and “When someone is upset the others know why” (Epstein et al., 1983). We should note that in the McMaster model, the general term “communication” is used to describe healthy, functional behaviors. Certainly, most communication scholars are careful not to use the term “communication” as loosely, given communication can also refer to dysfunctional behaviors (e.g., see chapter 16). The *roles* dimension of the McMaster model describes the established patterns of behavior in the family for handling various functions and tasks. In the McMaster model, the most functional families are those in which members each have a role and are accountable for performing the duties associated with that role. The fourth dimension is termed *affective responsiveness* and reflects the extent to which family members are able to experience and express a range of emotions. In the most functional families, the expression of emotion is accepted regardless of its nature. In more dysfunctional families, emotions are either suppressed, or only a limited range

of emotional expression (e.g., only happiness) is tolerated. A related dimension called *affective involvement* represents the family's interest in and connection to each other. This dimension is very similar to the cohesion dimension in Olson's model. Affective involvement implies that family members place value on each other's activities. Like the cohesion dimension of Olson's circumplex model, in the McMaster model it is assumed that the relationship between affective involvement and family functioning is curvilinear. There is such a thing as too much affective involvement. Similarly, too little affective involvement would mean that family members generally do not care about each other, so this too would be seen as dysfunctional. The sixth and final dimension of the McMaster Model of Family Functioning is *behavior control*. This variable reflects the way that the family expresses and maintains standards for the behavior of its members. In the model, there are four different behavior control profiles: flexible, rigid, laissez-faire, and chaotic. The rigid and chaotic styles are seen as extremes in low or high flexibility, respectively. These are not considered to be functional profiles for a family's behavior control. However, the laissez-faire and flexible styles are less extreme. In the McMaster model, flexible behavior control is viewed as most functional. In this model, behavior control is seen as an issue in situations involving danger, expressing psychological needs and drives, and social behavior. Like the affective involvement dimension, there is such a thing as too much and too little behavior control. The best functioning families have moderate amounts of behavior control in most circumstances.

FAMILY DIVERSITY

People have implicit, personal theories of family life that are shaped by experiences in their own family minicultures, their interactions with other families around them, their cultural background, and the media. In both implicit and explicit ways, culture influences scholars' and laypersons' views of optimal family interaction. "In sharp contrast with earlier times, latterday family diversity is more likely to be celebrated than castigated" (Aponte, 1999, p. 111). Even so, family scholars in the social scientific tradition are in the early stages of exploring the relationship between culture and family communication (Diggs & Socha, 2004; Goodwin, 1999). Current knowledge about family communication is, in part, a reflection of the types of families that have been studied—many of whom have been intact European American middle-class couples raising children in nuclear families (Flannagan et al., 2002; McHale & Grolnick, 2002). Such research may not correspond to non-European American families, and further, scholars must be careful about assuming that the research will generalize within and across ethnic groups (Gudykunst and Lee, 2001). In general, research has focused on the study of family diversity in three primary ways, diversity in (1) family form, (2) cultural values, and (3) family experiences. For example, when Socha and Diggs (1999) describe what it means to study families from an Afrocentric approach, they stress the need to study family forms, values, and experiences of African and African American families (p. 12; see also Asante, 1988). They describe that an Afrocentric approach to family life is characterized, in part, by (1) form, as in definitions of family that emphasize extended family versus just the nuclear family, (2) cultural values, as in family values of collectivism, spirituality, and openness, and (3) family experiences, as in an awareness of the family's story or struggle regarding race and racism. This is just one example of how scholars may use an alternative lens to study families. In this opening chapter, we lay a framework for some of the types of issues that appear later in the book with regard to diverse family forms, cultural values, and family experiences.

Diversity in Family Form

Research on diverse family forms explores how cultural background relates to issues such as family size, marriage, divorce, remarriage, gay and lesbian partnerships, single parent families,

22 *Family Communication and Basic Processes*

extended family living trends, etc. However, sometimes the variance *within* groups on a variable (e.g., family size) can be greater than the gap *separating* groups. It may also be difficult to determine what aspect of culture the differences between groups would be attributed to (e.g., socioeconomic class, ethnicity, religion) (Aponte, 1999, p. 111). Finally, an increasing number of people and families have two or more cultural or ethnic identities represented within them, meaning that the broad categories used by the U.S. Census Bureau do not tell the full story (Doucet & Hamon, 2007).

Schwede (2007) reports average family size by ethnicity as follows: non-Hispanic White (2.97), African American (3.34), American Indian (3.44), Alaskan Native (3.47), Asian (3.60), and Hispanic (3.93). Extended family households are proportionally the highest among recent immigrants from Latin American as well as Asian countries (Aponte, 1999). With regard to marital status, by age 35, 17% of Hispanic and 12% of White women have never married, whereas 42% of Black women have never married (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2009). African American women also have the highest proportion of unmarried births, which may help explain the tendency to emphasize extended family versus just the nuclear family (Jones, Zalot, Foster, Sterrett, & Chester, 2007; Socha & Diggs, 1999).

The U.S. Census Bureau does not provide much data on the number of gay and lesbian couples or the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered population at all. When the U.S. Census Bureau collects information about families and living arrangements, people can mark the “unmarried-partner” category, and then designate the partner as the same sex (Urban Institute, 2004). But the resultant data are most likely an undercount of gay and lesbian couples. Not attempting to correct for the potential undercount, the Urban Institute reports that in the state of New Jersey, 30% of same-sex couples have children, compared to 47% of heterosexual cohabiting and married couples (2004). These data point to the growing number of gay and lesbian couples with children, either from their present relationship or a previous one.

Diversity in Cultural Values

Using a cultural variability approach to the study of family communication, researchers examine a family’s or individual family member’s orientation toward major cultural values (Gudykunst & Lee, 2001; Hofstede, 1980). *Individualism-collectivism* refers to a person’s focus on the self versus the group. This cultural dimension affects individual perceptions about appropriate family cohesion. It may also influence perceptions about the extent to which parents should nurture their young and teach them to contribute to the common family good or instead teach them to be independent and stand out from the crowd. Lynch (1998) states:

What one person views as nurturance, another may view as spoiling. For example, [many parents throughout the world nurture children] by having them sleep in their parents’ bed; following them around in order to feed them; keeping them in close physical proximity through holding, touching, and carrying long after they can walk alone. Many families in the United States would describe themselves as nurturing, but they expect more independence. Infants may sleep alone in rooms of their own soon after birth; feedings are scheduled, and young children are expected to stay in a particular chair or area for meals; and children spend far more time in infant swings or playpens than on the laps of their caregivers. (p. 59)

Depending on one’s orientation toward individualism–collectivism, the preference for openness or the objection to enmeshed bonding implied by Olson’s model is culturally influenced (Parks, 1982). Individualism–collectivism may even be intertwined with family structure issues. Some families, such as Hispanic families with a collectivist orientation, may be distinguished by extended family networks that are active in daily life, in the form of childcare, shared housing, or socializing.

Masculinity–femininity refers to whether sex roles in families are defined and differentiated (i.e., masculine) versus flexible and interchangeable (i.e., feminine). Naturally, this dimension relates to perceptions about roles and rights in marriage, as well as socialization of children. *Power–distance* refers to the extent to which a person respects authority and hierarchy (i.e., high power–distance) versus viewing all persons as equal in status (low power–distance). Power–distance levels influence family rules and negotiation, as well as respect for family members and family tradition.

Diggs and Socha (2004) point out other sociocultural values, such as religious values, that are ripe for study. While much has been written about indirect relationships between religion and family interaction (e.g., how religion informs family values or how religiosity is linked to divorce rates), only a few studies have taken on the task of linking religion to specific types of family interaction (see Brody, Stoneman, Flor, & McCrary, 1994).

Diversity in Experiences

Diverse experiences define families and shape the course of family interaction. For example, the immigrant experience is marked by acculturative stressors, sometimes in the form of discrimination, lack of social support, lack of familiarity with U.S. norms, tensions between first/second generations who experience conflict about the pace and depth of appropriate acculturation or the new tasks that the acculturation process demands of family members (e.g., children involved in language brokering for their parents) (Bush, Bohon, & Kim, 2005; Smokowski, Rose, & Bacallao, 2008; Tannenbaum, 2005). In other cases, interaction in the family is influenced by social and historical trauma related to racial discrimination. For example, Teufel-Shone et al. (2005) describe the family interaction profile of American Indian families as one of high conflict, yet midrange cohesion and support. Unlike national samples of distressed families, the American Indian families in their study were able to exhibit unified and cohesive family environments even in the midst of high conflict. The conflicts were mostly attributed to stress and oppression connected with loss of the native language, memories of relocation, problems with the reservation system, substance abuse, and lack of employment opportunities. Many other diverse family experiences have recently been studied to better understand how family interaction is impacted. These include the experiences of poverty, rural/urban family life (e.g., Pitts, Fowler, Kaplan, Nussbaum, & Becker, 2009), family separations through work, the military or prison, and even physical and mental health problems within the family (see chapters 11, 14, and 15).

CONCLUSION

Defining family is a complicated issue. There is not one universally accepted definition of family, and any given individual defines family differently depending on his or her purpose. Three categories of criteria that distinguish definitions of family include (1) form, (2) function, and (3) interaction. Family communication scholars place special emphasis on interaction as a defining feature. We also examined labels for common family structures as well as common expectations for tasks performed and interactions exchanged among family members. These labels provide a language for describing families throughout the book. In addition, the family tasks and interactions hint at many of the family processes we will examine in subsequent chapters. To some, defining family seems mundane. However, important scientific, legal, and social implications rest on family definitions.

In upcoming chapters, we will explore many of the family trends depicted by the demographic data on families presented in this chapter. We will also continue to explore the defining features of family communication, including the complex nature of content and relationship

24 *Family Communication and Basic Processes*

messages and the role of communication in constituting family meaning. In addition, the models of family functioning (Olson's circumplex model and the McMaster model) point toward many of the issues concerning family interaction that we will explore in depth. Finally, diversity in family forms, cultural values, and family experiences impact the way people define family and interact within the family.

2 Theoretical Perspectives on Family Communication

In this chapter we review a number of influential theories of family communication and relationships. Although not all of the theories discussed in this chapter were explicitly developed as theories of family interaction per se, each has been widely and fruitfully applied in the scientific study of families.

What is a theory, and why do social scientists develop theories? Simply put, a theory is an explanation of a fact pattern. Social scientists generally do not develop theories to explain individual cases or incidents. Rather, theories are developed to explain how and why certain things happen, particularly when those things happen repeatedly. For example, scientists and therapists realized that a lot of couples who get divorced exhibit certain patterns of destructive conflict. For that reason, they attempted to develop a theory that explains how and why conflict can harm a marriage (see chapters 6 and 12 for further analysis of this issue). If only a handful of divorced couples had problems with conflict, scientists probably would not have been motivated to develop an explanation for why conflict harms marriage. Scientific theories serve a number of useful functions. Perhaps the most basic function of a theory is to *explain* how and why a phenomenon occurs or operates. A related function of theories is to *predict* when a phenomenon may or may not happen. For example, in recent years there has been great interest in developing theories of divorce that allow for prediction of who will divorce and who will stay married. In addition, theories sometimes allow scientists and therapists to *control* a phenomenon. If a valid theory of divorce explains the phenomenon as caused by dysfunctional communication patterns, instituting training seminars or therapy techniques that address those communication problems might be a useful way to lower the divorce rate.

In this chapter, we present an analysis of family systems theory, symbolic interaction theory, social learning theory, attachment theory, and the dialectic perspective. We present these theories because they provide basic and abstract conceptualizations of family processes that have application to a number of different family phenomena, and will therefore appear repeatedly in other chapters in this book. Readers interested in more information on these theories as well as other theories developed to explain more specific family processes may wish to consult Bengtson, Acock, Allen, Dilworth-Anderson, and Klein (2005), Braithwaite and Baxter (2006), Hamon, Ingoldsby, Miller, and Smith (2008), and White and Klein (2008).

When reading about different family theories, notice how each offers different explanations of how and why family interactions function as they do. It is important to keep in mind that no theory offers the one and only explanation for a fact pattern. There are often multiple explanations for why family interactions function as they do. The utility of a theory is therefore determined, at least in part, by how well it holds up under empirical scrutiny. In other words, are the available data consistent with the propositions of the theory? All of the theories discussed in this chapter have been associated with numerous studies that support the essential components and elements of the theory.

FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY

Historical Background

As social scientific theories go, family systems theory has unique beginnings. In fact, family systems theory emerged from a line of work that was more closely related to engineering and biology than families or human relationships. Family systems theory was derived from general systems theory (GST), which is a theoretical perspective developed for explaining how elements of a system work together to produce outputs from the various inputs they are given. A “system” is nothing more than a “set of elements standing in interrelation among themselves and with the environment” (Bertalanffy, 1975, p. 159). Two key figures in the development of GST were biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy and mathematician/engineer Norbert Wiener (e.g., Bertalanffy, 1968; Wiener, 1948). Wiener is most noted for his work on *cybernetics*, which is the science of self-correcting systems. An early application of GST came from work on antiaircraft gunnery during World War II. An essential realization of this work was the necessity to constantly compare the aim of the weapon, and the resultant course of its munitions delivery, to the position of the target. When the ammunition was being delivered too far ahead of the plane or too far behind, the operator of the weapon had to take this into consideration and adjust the aim of the antiaircraft gun. In the abstract, this concept is known as *cybernetic feedback* and would be an essential component of GST.

Whitchurch and Constantine (1993) identified three basic assumptions of GST. First, systems theories can unify science. The principles of GST are thought by many to cut across traditional academic boundaries. That is to say, they apply to systems in the natural as well as social sciences. For this reason, concepts and processes that describe the functioning of an automobile engine (mechanical engineering) could be equally applicable to a description of the functioning of a family (family science), or the functioning of a particular ecosystem (biology). A second assumption of GST is that a system must be understood as a whole. This concept, known as *holism*, is fundamental to all systems approaches. A system cannot be understood by merely studying each of its components in isolation from each other. There is little to be learned about the functions and outputs of an automobile engine by carefully examining the alternator and oil filter. That would not be much more useful than trying to learn about a family by carefully studying their cat and their daughter. The concept of holism implies that “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” To understand the system, one must look at it holistically, considering all elements and how they relate to each other. A third assumption of GST is that human systems are self-reflexive. *Self-reflexivity* means that we can develop our own goals and monitor our own behavior. This is inherent in the fact that human systems are cybernetic systems that can process feedback, which is what allows for adjustments in behaviors in order to reach a goal.

The Family as a System

At first glance, the connection between “family” and such concepts as engines, antiaircraft artillery, and ecosystems may not be obvious. However, the family is a system that operates in accord with many of the same principles as these other systems. At the same time, the family is a special type of system with some characteristics that set it apart from some other types of systems. The family is often characterized as an open and ongoing system (Broderick, 1993). Systems that are *open* take input from the environment and produce output back to the environment. The input that families take from the environment includes things as simple as food bought at the grocery store to more complex matters such as information on the best colleges to send their children to. Output also includes a vast range of things from garbage to professional work to children who become members of society. Although no family is truly a closed system, families vary in the extent to which they are open. Families that are extremely

open are said to have permeable *boundaries*. Boundaries are simply dividing lines that determine who is in and who is out of the system (Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Bochner, 1995). The permeable boundaries of the very open family suggest that people can come and go with ease, into and out of the family system. Such a family may, for example, allow a distant cousin to move in for an extended period of time. At the same time, a teenage child might move out of the home to study in Europe as an exchange student. Families that are less open are more inclined to keep to themselves and send clear messages about the limited extent to which they will tolerate “outsiders” entering into the system.

Any system that is *ongoing* has a past, present, and future. If one considers the extended family, most families could be viewed as perpetual. Obviously, we all have ancestors and, barring some catastrophe, our families will all continue long after we are gone. In the grand scheme of things, when people think about their families (e.g., parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, and uncles) they are really considering a mere snapshot in time. The greater ongoing system has a very long history and is sure to have a very long future.

The fact that families are open and ongoing systems means that they have a number of qualities that distinguish them from other types of systems (Broderick, 1993). For instance, all open and ongoing systems are *dynamic*. The relationships among their elements and the environment are not static. Rather, they change over time. The way that a mother relates to her child at age 1 is very different from when her child is age 15. The qualities of open and ongoing systems are *emergent*. The elements of the family interact to produce something that is more than just a collection of individuals. Systems theorists often make an analogy to baking a cake. Combining eggs, flour, sugar, and milk and baking it results in something very different than a mere collection of the individual ingredients. Families have a similar quality of emergent properties. Families also exhibit regular patterns from which we can deduce *rules*. For example, observing a family over a long period of time might reveal that whenever a member has a birthday, he or she is excused from any household chores. To the extent that this pattern is evident, one could say that this is a “rule” in the family. It is also the case that these patterns of interaction, or rules, are *hierarchically structured*. This means that rules exist at different levels of abstraction, and some take precedence over others (see chapter 4). Open and ongoing systems also *regulate relationships among their components*. In order to maintain the integrity of the system, it is essential to have some rules or patterns that hold the elements together and allow for the smooth functioning of the overall system. Parents who scold their children for fighting with each other are, in the abstract, attempting to regulate their relationships. Constant and intense fighting among family members could otherwise threaten the family’s well-being and ability to realize their goals. Finally, open and ongoing systems *regulate relationships between the system and the environment*. All families exist in a greater society ecosystem or suprasystem. Because they are open, interaction with elements outside of the immediate family system is essential. For this reason, families develop rules and patterns of conduct for these interactions, again, with the goal of protecting the integrity of the family system. A family rule that children cannot go out on dates until they are 15, is an example of a rule designed to regulate relationships between the family and the external environment.

The family’s distinction as an open and ongoing system helps to delineate it from a variety of other systems. However, the family is not the only open and ongoing system. Many animal societies and environmental ecosystems could also be characterized as open and ongoing systems. To more fully appreciate the concept of family systems it is necessary to look closer at some of the family processes that are inherent in family systems theory.

Major Processes in Family Systems Theory

System processes are the characteristics that describe how the family system functions as a whole unit (Bochner & Eisenberg, 1987). One way to understand family systems theory is to

examine the family processes that are assumed to play an important role in the family's day to day functioning.

Mutual Influence

According to family systems theory all family components are interdependent. That is to say, what happens to one member affects all other members of the family. The actions of every family member will influence the actions of other family members. Family systems theorists feel that families are constantly in the process of influencing each other, and that this process never ends. So, for example, a child graduating from college is not just an individual achievement; it is a family event. For parents, it may represent the culmination of years of child rearing, a reduced financial burden, and the possibility of a more distant relationship with the child as he or she moves away to start a new job. To a sibling, this event may represent more freedom to use the family car, no longer having to share a bedroom, and the absence of a reliable tennis partner. Either way, the graduation of one member of the family impacts all other members of the family. Keep in mind however that there is no linear cause (child graduates) and effect (more distant relationship with the child) relationship in this hypothetical family. The act of going to college, graduating, and moving away to take a job is also influenced by the family. For example, a child without a close relationship to his or her parents might be more likely to move out of state after graduation. The concept of mutual influence suggests that all family members influence each other.

Stability

All families seek some level of regularity in their lives. Regularity brings predictability, and at least some degree of predictability allows for smooth functioning of the family. The tendency to seek stability is called *morphostasis*. Patterns, routines, and rules all allow families to function with some level of stability. A total lack of stability, or chaos, could easily destroy a family system. In a state of chaos, family roles are unclear, the behavior of family members is unpredictable, and important tasks may go undone because everyone thought that someone else would do them. Alternatively, family members may waste energy duplicating each other's efforts. It is easy to see how such a scenario would make the family such an inhospitable place as to motivate most of its members to leave the system. Although some degree of flexibility and change is healthy for the family (see section on family functioning in chapter 1), all families need and seek some stability.

Change

Just as families need some stability, healthy families must experience some change. In fact, families are also driven to seek change. This tendency is known as *morphogenesis*. Morphogenesis is the tendency to reorganize and evolve over time. As family members marry, have children, age, and die, the family evolves. This is a natural and unavoidable evolution. Families also exist in a larger society, and as society itself changes, so do most families. Fifty years ago family members may have looked down on a mother who took a full time job while her children were still young. Given the changing economic and social conditions of society, families today may be more inclined to not only accept but honor someone who takes on so many tasks.

Feedback and Calibration

Families are information processors. They perform the cybernetic function of examining their own behavior and trying to correct it so as to achieve goals. In a feedback loop, the family examines its output, and if that output is not meeting the goal or reaching some standard, they

send a message (which becomes new input) to correct the behavior that led to the deviant outcome. An obvious example of this would be rearing children. Families will often correct or punish deviant behavior of their children in the hope that the children will ultimately grow up in accord with some standard defined by the family. The goal of feedback and control is to reach some level of *homeostasis*, or equilibrium. A married couple with full time jobs that often keep them apart from each other may plan a vacation together to allow them to reestablish some balance between separateness and connection in their relationship. *Negative feedback*, also known as error-actuated feedback, occurs when the family initiates corrective action upon awareness of a deviation from some standard. This is the way that most thermostats operate. Once the temperature deviates from a set point, the thermostat sends a signal to the furnace or air conditioner to produce more heating or cooling. Parents who punish their children for bad behavior operate on negative feedback. *Positive feedback*, or deviation-amplifying feedback, works to enhance changes from a set point. For example, if a young adult child who lives with his parents and works a part-time job suddenly starts looking into colleges to attend, the parents might respond by verbally encouraging him, offering financial assistance with tuition, and relieving him of household chores so that he can pursue his studies. In this way, the parents use feedback to actually encourage change in their son's behavior, once they realize that he is contemplating a change from the norm of his part-time job.

Equifinality

The concept of equifinality refers to the fact that the same end state may be reached in many different ways. Different families can achieve the same goals by traveling down very different paths. Consider for example the goal of providing for the family. Some may do this through the father's employment. In other families, both the mother and the father work. In still other families, teenage children may work and contribute some of their wages to the family. In all cases, the family system generates income to provide for their needs, but in very different ways. The family systems concept of equifinality is useful and important because it is a reminder that there is no single version of family well-being and functionality. Instead, there are many different ways that families can pursue the same goal. A related systems concept, *multifinality*, indicates that the same set of inputs may lead to different outputs. Two middle-class, suburban families with similar incomes and resources may end up raising very different children. This is because different families will process the same inputs differently.

These, and additional concepts and processes in Family Systems Theory, are assembled in Table 2.1.

Evaluation of Family Systems Theory

Family systems theory is the dominant paradigm in family science. It has been noted that "Many, if not most, family communication specialists have a systems theory worldview" (Whitchurch & Dickson, 1999). Nevertheless, family systems theory has been criticized on several grounds (see Klein & White, 1996, and Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993, for reviews). One position is that family systems theory is not really a true theory, but rather a philosophical perspective. There is some ambiguity and generality in family systems theory that makes it hard to generate concrete, testable hypotheses. Also, some people feel that family systems theory goes too far in emphasizing the role of *all* family members in influencing the phenomena that the family experiences. If a father loses his job, more often than not he is more responsible for that outcome than the family's one-year old child. On a related point, family systems theory has also been criticized by feminist scholars who argue that systems conceptualizations do not recognize the fact that women and children often have less power and fewer resources than men. For that reason, it may be unwise to view the contribution of women and children to family matters as equal to that of men. This criticism has become particularly heated when

Table 2.1 Key concepts in family systems theory

| <i>Family Systems Concept</i> | <i>Definition</i> |
|-------------------------------|--|
| • Boundaries | The border between the system and its external environment |
| • Enmeshment | A lack of differentiation between family members so as to minimize the development of individual identities |
| • Equifinality | The idea that the same end state can be reached by many different paths |
| • Feedback | The family's response to a behavior or process that is observed |
| • Goals | The family's desired outcomes or end states |
| • Holism | The family can only be understood by examining it in its entirety; the whole is more than the sum of its parts; also known as nonsummativity |
| • Homeostasis | Maintaining a state of equilibrium through feedback and calibration |
| • Interdependence | The idea that all components of the system are interrelated; what happens to one happens to all; the actions of one element affect the actions of the others |
| • Morphogenesis | The family's tendency to evolve and change with time |
| • Morphostasis | The tendency to seek stability or equilibrium |
| • Multifinality | The idea that the same set of inputs can lead to different outputs in different families |
| • Mutual influence | Family members influence each other |
| • Negative feedback | Error-actuated feedback that is engaged when actions deviate from a family standard; this feedback attempts to suppress the deviation |
| • Positive feedback | Deviation-amplifying feedback that is designed to stimulate and enhance deviation for a norm |
| • Requisite variety | Having the necessary range of resources and responses to adequately address the demands encountered in the environment |
| • Rules | Prescribed patterns of behavior in the family; they contribute to the family's stability |
| • Subsystem | A smaller system within the family system such as husband-wife or parent-child |
| • Suprasystem | The larger system in which the family is embedded such as the extended family or society more generally |

topics such as family violence and sexual abuse are discussed. Although systems theorists would not “blame” the victim, they would try to understand family problems as a function of the relationships among family members, instead of the behavior of an individual perpetrator. Whitchurch and Constantine (1993) argue that this later critique is based on a misunderstanding of GST, and that recent developments in family systems theory actually recognize different levels of power in the family through the concept of hierarchy.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTION THEORY

Historical Background

Even before the development of symbolic interaction theory, 20th century pragmatists, such as John Dewey and William James, began to argue that reality is not objectively “set in stone,” but rather it is constantly changing. This way of thinking about reality was somewhat novel for the early 20th century. Furthermore, this new notion of reality advocated that participants constantly cocreate a subjective social reality as they interact. Inspired by the ideas of these

earlier thinkers, George Herbert Mead is credited with articulating the foundations of the theory later named symbolic interaction (SI) theory. Along with Mead, Manford Kuhn is recognized for contributing to and affirming the unique ideas of SI. Mead was a very popular and respected teacher at the University of Chicago, and, after his death, his students compiled lecture notes from his classes to produce a book they titled *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934). One of Mead's students, Herbert Blumer, termed Mead's theoretical tenets "symbolic interaction theory." Mead and others were interested in the way humans create, react to, and redefine the shared, symbolic meanings in their social environment. Mead began with the premise that words and nonverbal behaviors are the primary symbols to which humans assign meaning. He stressed the idea that meaning only occurs when people share common symbols and interpretations in a state of intersubjectivity. He also elaborated on the idea that symbolic meanings are heavily influenced by perceptions, including people's own perceptions and other people's perceptions of them, and the social structure around them. For example, imagine a college student who comes home over a break from school with baskets full of dirty laundry. Her mother washes and folds the clothes for her. What does this behavior symbolize? Because SI sees meaning as occurring between people, we cannot know the meaning until we study the mother's and daughter's interaction and perceptions. Perhaps (1) the daughter perceives herself as mature and self-sufficient, (2) based on prior interaction, the mother views and accepts the daughter as self-sufficient, and (3) the two come to a common interpretation that the mother is not obligated to do the laundry, but chooses to do so as a symbol of care for her busy daughter. In another mother–daughter relationship, this very same behavior could symbolize an obligatory caretaking duty full of resent, guilt, and the perception of a lazy daughter.

Mead and Blumer felt that the study of human beings requires different methods than the study of physical objects or laws of nature. This is because human behavior can only be understood by knowing what it means to the person who is actually performing the behavior. Because SI emphasizes individuals' perceptions and the intersubjectivity shared by participants, it is difficult to observe and understand communication from the outside. Not until researchers know the perspective of the individual, can they understand him or her. Mead and Blumer advocated the use of case studies and examination of stories and personal histories in order to understand people's behaviors from the perspective of the people themselves.

Today, symbolic interaction can be thought of as a diverse collection of theories rather than a particular theory (Klein & White, 1996). Over time, many branches of the theory developed (e.g., social construction theory, role theory, and self theory), emphasizing slightly different aspects of symbolic, human interaction. For instance, social construction theory spun off SI to explain coconstructed meaning rather than shared meaning. That is, social construction theory builds on the ideas of SI to further emphasize that "meaning does not reside inside one person's head, waiting to be shared with another. Rather, meaning exists in the practice of communication between people" (Turner & West, 2002, p. 61; see also Chen & Pearce, 1995). To illustrate the social construction of meaning, consider what happens when people become grandparents for the first time. They are often assigned a new title (i.e., Grandma, Nana, Grammy, etc.), which is already loaded with basic cultural meaning. However, the title takes on further meaning as the grandparent/grandchild relationship develops. Through family interaction, the family coconstructs what they mean by the term "grandma." In some families, grandma is a distant relative who sends gifts on holidays. For others, grandma is a primary caretaker, acting more like some "moms." In sum, society's expectations for grandparents influences the meaning assigned to the role, but an additional layer of meaning is generated through the family's own interaction.

Central Themes, Assumptions, and Concepts in SI

There are at least three central themes of SI and several underlying assumptions associated with these themes (Klein & White, 1996; LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993; West & Turner, 2000).

32 *Family Communication and Basic Processes*

Each theme relates to one of the three concepts that title Mead's book, *Mind, Self, and Society*. The first theme involves the importance of meanings for human behavior and relates to Mead's concept of *mind*. Three assumptions reveal this theme (Blumer, 1969; West & Turner, 2000, p. 76):

- (1) Humans act toward others on the basis of the meaning those others have for them.
- (2) Meaning is created in interaction between people.
- (3) Meaning is modified through an interpretive process.

This collection of assumptions acknowledges that human minds have the capacity to use symbols to represent thought. In particular, people rely on common, significant symbols that have shared, social meaning. As a symbol system, language works because people act in accordance with shared meanings. Even though people have many shared symbols, symbolic meaning is always being modified in interaction. Through perspective taking and other interpretive processes, people come to understand others' views. For instance, in symbolic role-taking, people try to take another person's perspective, or step inside his or her mind, in order to see how another person sorts out meaning. Very young children have a difficult time perspective-taking. In a game of hide and seek, young children may think that if their own eyes are closed, no one else can see them. They soon learn that what they see is not what other people see.

The second theme addresses how humans develop self-concepts and relates to Mead's concept of *self*. Two assumptions reveal this theme (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993; West & Turner, 2000, p. 78):

- (1) Individuals develop self-concepts through interaction with others.
- (2) Self-concepts provide an important motive for behavior.

Mead describes the *self* as an *I* and a *Me*. During interaction, the *I* simply acts, impulsively and spontaneously. The *Me* is more reflective, concerned with how people come across to their social world. The *Me* employs social comparisons and considers the way other people view the self. More specifically, the *Me* attends to reflected self-appraisals. *Reflected self-appraisals* refer to the appraisals or evaluations other people make of the self. The extent to which another person's view affects one's self-concept depends on how much one values the other person's opinion. Young children often take the comments of their primary caretakers very seriously, because they have few other referents in their lives. Some college students, on the other hand, only take their parents' opinions with a "grain of salt" because they are receiving a great deal of reflected self-appraisal from other important sources including friends, romantic partners, or professors. As SI indicates, the way people view their *self* motivates their future behavior. For example, people who have been told they are bad at math and who view themselves as bad at math have little reason to be motivated to major in math. Their self-concept may even set forth a self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby they see little reason to try hard at math because they already perceive they are bad at it. Putting forth little effort at math helps meet their already low expectations.

Finally, the third theme describes the relationship between individuals and society and relates to Mead's concept of *society* (West & Turner, 2000, p. 79):

- (1) People and groups are influenced by cultural and social processes.
- (2) Social structure is worked out through social interaction.

Mead states that *society* is comprised of particular others and generalized others. *Particular others* refer to close significant others, such as family and friends, whereas *generalized others* refer to the larger community or society. According to SI, people act in the context of societal

norms and values that are held by their particular others and generalized others. For example, family members know what is normal behavior for their family culture (i.e., their particularized others), and they act with those norms in mind. Some families have a ritual of eating dinner together around a table every night. Other families do not expect members to eat at the same time or in the same place. Just as the interaction in one's family creates a set of norms and values, society (i.e., generalized others) influences what is viewed as normal family interaction. The media, for instance, is one societal force that shapes standards for family interaction.

Evaluation and Application to Family Communication

Sociologist and symbolic interaction theorist Ernest W. Burgess was “the first to define family in terms of its interaction: ‘a unity of interacting personalities,’ by which he meant a family as a living, changing, growing thing, ‘a unity of interacting persons,’ rather than ‘a mere collection of individuals’” (as cited in Whitchurch & Dickson, 1999, p. 691). Burgess’ pioneering approach viewed interaction as the defining feature of families. His work became a theoretical cornerstone of family research. SI inspired a new way of studying families, by examining family interaction and the creation and maintenance of family symbols and themes.

In particular, SI has guided research on topics such as the socialization of family members, symbolic interpretations of family events, and family identities and narratives. As Steinmetz (1999) states: “We are not born with a sense of who we are, but must develop a sense of ‘self’ through symbolization with other people” (p. 375). Symbolic interaction draws attention to the critical role that parents, siblings, and other outside forces play as socializing agents for children (Bohannon & White, 1999; Cheng & Kuo, 2000). Children observe appropriate behavior for certain roles, and they receive reflected self-appraisal from the significant others in their family. Second, SI explains how families symbolize both routine and extraordinary events, though a great deal of attention has been given to extraordinary events, such as marriage, death, or major family illnesses (Book, 1996; Rehm & Franck, 2000; see also chapter 3). Informed by the society around them, families develop rituals for family events, such as weddings or funerals, or rituals for routine events, such as bedtime rituals to put a child to sleep. Finally, families generate stories to symbolize one family member’s identity or the whole family identity (Fivush, Duke, & Bohanek, 2010; Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999; Stone, 1988).

There are a number of obvious strengths and weaknesses of SI. As a strength, SI highlights that meaning is dynamic, subjective, and understandings are worked out as family members interact with one another and society. The problem is that researchers sometimes have a difficult time studying family meanings and symbols because they are so subjective. Apart from actually living with a family, the only way researchers can learn about these subjective understandings is by asking family members to report their perceptions and tell their own story. Some family members may not even be aware of their own subjective meanings, and, if they are, they may be unwilling to report it or may adjust their story for someone outside the family. Nonetheless, SI and its theoretical offshoots continue to inspire a great deal of research in family studies.

SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

Background

Social learning theory was developed by Stanford University psychologist Albert Bandura (Bandura, 1977). Bandura developed social learning theory, not as a theory of family communication per se, but rather as a more general theory of behavioral acquisition. More recently, Bandura has expanded social learning theory into the more general social cognitive theory

(e.g., Bandura, 1986, 1994, 2001). However, for purposes of the present discussion we will contain our presentation largely to explanation of the basic principles of social learning theory.

In the premier study of what was later to become social learning theory, Bandura, Ross, and Ross (1963) documented that children will imitate a model who is reinforced for performing certain behaviors. To explore this issue, they randomly assigned nursery school students to watch a filmed portrayal of a child model. In one condition, the model behaved aggressively and was rewarded for doing so. In the second condition the model behaved aggressively and was punished for doing so. In the control group the model did not behave aggressively at all. Shortly thereafter, the children were allowed to play, and researchers measured their aggressive behavior during the play session. They found that children who observed the aggressive model get rewarded exhibited significantly more aggressive behavior themselves than either those in the aggression-punished condition or those in the control group. Also, those who saw the model get punished for aggressive behavior behaved much less aggressively than those in the other conditions. Bandura and his colleagues theorized that the children learned the consequences of behaving aggressively by observing what happened when the model behaved aggressively. When the model was rewarded, the nursery school children imitated or enacted the same behavior that produced the reward for the model. When the model was punished, the children seemed to avoid performing the behavior that resulted in punishment for the model. This idea of observational learning through modeling would become a central element of Bandura's social learning theory.

One can think of the process of social learning as a search for "if-then" relationships (Smith, 1982). Consistent with the more general principles of behavioral theory, according to social learning theory people seek rewards and try to avoid punishments. Bandura notes that, fortunately, people are able to learn what brings rewards and what brings punishments, at least some of the time, through observing what happens to other people. Imagine what life would be like if the only way we could learn about the consequences of driving without a seatbelt, playing with a loaded gun, picking up rattlesnakes, and drinking household chemicals was through direct experience. Most people would not live to see their 20th birthday. We are able to learn about the consequences of these behaviors by observing other people's misfortunes. Similarly, we are able to learn about behaviors that bring more positive consequences by observing others. Once the "if-then" rule (e.g., "If I touch a hot stove, then I will burn my hand" or "If I scream and cry, then my mother will give me candy") is learned, most people act accordingly to secure the reward or avoid the punishment.

Learning about the Consequences of Behavior

In social learning theory, people are assumed to gain most of their knowledge about the consequences of performing various behaviors through two possible sources. The first, and most obvious, is through *direct experience*. In this rudimentary mode of learning, people acquire knowledge of behavioral consequences by actually experiencing them. For example, if a child eats a chili pepper and it burns his or her mouth, that experience teaches the child to avoid eating chili peppers in the future. If the child eats a chocolate candy bar, and it tastes good, the child would learn the reinforcing value of eating chocolate and would presumably perform the behavior frequently in the future. The idea of learning through direct experience and the rewards and punishments that are associated with our behaviors is a basic element of behavioral theory, and is a mode by which even the simplest of animals can and will learn. However, because of their ability to form mental representations and to abstract rules from observations of actions and their consequences, humans (and some other animals) are also able to learn through observation and the *vicarious experience* that it presents. Learning by vicarious experience happens when we take note of the effects of *other people's* behaviors. For example, if John observed his parents reward his sister with \$20 for bringing home a report card with straight

As, he is likely to abstract the following if-then rule: “If you get straight As in school, then mom and dad will give you money.” So long as receiving money is seen by John as a positive outcome, he is likely to try to enact that behavior (i.e., working hard in school to get good grades) himself. Note that John did not learn the if-then rule by directly experiencing the effects of getting good grades. Rather, he learned the rule vicariously, through observing what happened when his sister did.

The Process of Social Learning

Let us dissect the process of observational learning, or learning by modeling, a bit further. Learning through vicarious experience is dependent upon several interrelated processes. To start, there must be some *attention* paid to the model. Each day people are exposed to dozens, hundreds, and, in some cases, thousands of other people. Each of these people is a potential model from whom others can learn about the consequences of enacting various behaviors. However, social learning can only happen if we pay attention to both the model’s behavior and its associated consequences. Without attention to the model, there can be no observational learning. Second, there must be *retention* of the if-then rule that is learned by observing the model. That is to say, we have to form a mental representation of what was learned and store that in our memory, perhaps as a more abstract rule. Bandura (1986) notes that retention can be enhanced by rehearsal. The more often people rehearse the socially learned rule (e.g., if I apologize for doing something wrong, people will forgive me) the more likely they are to have access to it at critical times, and therefore to perform the appropriate behavior for either securing rewards or avoiding punishing response from the social environment. Next, there are a number of *behavioral production processes* that are vital to performing the observed behavior. People must have the ability to produce or enact the behavior that they observed. This often requires organization of constituent sub-skills into a new response pattern. Sometimes people are able to enhance their ability to perform observed behaviors by receiving informative feedback from others on troublesome aspects of their behavior. For example, a father might teach his daughter how to kick a soccer ball by modeling the behavior. If the daughter does not perform the behavior with the same competence as the father, he might give her feedback on what she has done incorrectly in order to help her perform the behavior in the best way possible. Finally, there has to be *motivation* to perform the modeled behavior. In the example above, the father might model the proper way to kick a soccer ball 100 times in the presence of his daughter. However, even if she pays attention to him, remembers how to do it, and has the competence to perform the modeled behavior, she will not do so unless she has sufficient motivation.

Where does the motivation to perform behavior come from? Social learning theory recognizes that incentives can be inherent in the behavior, vicariously produced, or self-produced (Bandura, 1986). Some behaviors are inherently satisfying to most people. For example, people generally like to eat ice cream. The motivation to eat ice cream comes from consequences that are inherent in the behavior itself, not from some abstract or complex rule that is learned (e.g., “eating ice cream will keep the dairy farmers in business and will therefore be good for the state economy”). Bandura refers to the effects of such behaviors as eating ice cream or drinking water when thirsty as *direct incentive*. Sometimes the incentive for performing a behavior is *self-produced*. With self-produced incentives, people essentially reward themselves for a job well-done. There is nothing inherently satisfying about bowling a strike. However, bowling enthusiasts will mentally congratulate themselves upon bowling a strike because they have come to value this sort of performance. To people who do not care about or understand bowling, knocking down ten pins with a heavy ball may seem like a meaningless behavior. Most important to social learning theory, people are sometimes motivated to perform behaviors because of *vicarious incentives*. People often acquire and perform behaviors because they see other people do so and get rewarded. The fashion and clothing industry—an industry that

relies heavily on modeling—is constantly trying to impart vicarious knowledge of the consequences for performing various behaviors (e.g., wear this brand of shoes and you will be a good athlete, wear this style of pants and you will look great and gain the admiration of your peers, etc.).

Application to Family Communication

Even though social learning processes operate throughout the life span, and through observation of virtually any person, their applicability to child learning in the family context is undeniable. Smith (1982) noted that “we acquire most of our basic values and personal habits by initially observing our parents’ behavior and later the behavior of admired friends and reference groups” (p. 201). Children often grow up to hold similar political and religious values as their parents, pursue many of the same hobbies and occupations as their parents, and sometimes to even drive the same brand of car that their parents do. Social learning theory provides a compelling account for how and why this happens. The theory is a reminder that anything that parents do in the presence of their children can and often will communicate abstract if-then rules to the children. If the surrounding circumstances are right, these rules may then become prompts for behavior, or inhibitors of behavior, depending upon the content of the mental representation.

Smith (1982) described a number of conditions that affect the success of modeling, several of which have obvious applicability in the family setting. One such factor is the *similarity* between the model and the observer. The more similar the model is to the observer, the more likely the observer is to enact the modeled behavior. Similarity between the model and the self contributes to self-efficacy in the observer. When people experience self-efficacy, they feel that they are able to adequately perform the behavior. Supposedly the thinking with models similar to the self is that “if they can do it, then I can do it.” It is obvious that there is considerable perceived similarity within family groups. For this reason, family members can be ideal models of behavior. Smith also notes that modeling is more successful when models have high *status*. Certainly parents and older siblings have very high status in the eyes of young children. Because most children start out in life looking up to their parents, they naturally use their parents as a benchmark for appropriate behavior. Also, modeling is most successful when there are *multiple models*. In the family context, it is often the case that more than one person performs a particular behavior. So, for example, if two or three members of the family are avid golfers, children raised in that family will have multiple models to observe, and are consequently very likely to adopt the same behaviors (i.e., take up golf) themselves.

Family science researchers have continued to apply social learning theory to the explanation of many functional and dysfunctional aspects of family interaction. For example, there are many who feel that people learn how to be spouses and how to be parents by observing their own parents in these roles. In the area of family dysfunction, there is compelling evidence for social learning processes in family/partner violence, substance abuse, and even divorce (e.g., Andrews, Hops, & Duncan, 1997; Mihalic & Elliot, 1997; Swinford, DeMaris, Cernkovich, & Giordano, 2000) (see chapters 12, 14, and 16 for more in-depth analysis of these family issues). When parents engage in physical violence or substance abuse in the presence of their children, they inadvertently communicate that this is an acceptable form of behavior. Young children lack the reasoning skills to independently determine what is right and what is wrong and therefore use their parents as a benchmark for appropriate conduct. The idea is that if the parents do it, it must be the correct thing to do. So if the mother and father resort to physical violence when engaged in conflict, or consume large amounts of alcohol when stressed, children who observe that behavior are likely to enact it themselves later in life. Similarly, when children observe their parents’ divorce, they are likely to learn the if-then rule that goes “if you have problems in your marriage, then you get divorced.” This is one of several hypotheses for the intergenerational transmission of divorce discussed in chapter 12. It is apparent that social

learning processes are so powerful that the if-then rules learned in family contexts and the behaviors that they prompt will often hold up in the face of intense challenges. For example, most people know that divorce and domestic violence are not positive experiences. Yet, the template for behavior that is learned in the family of origin through social learning can be nearly impossible for some people to modify or escape. Despite “knowing” that family violence is wrong, when confronted with intense conflict, that becomes the default response. As disturbing as these family patterns are, they are a testimony to the power of social learning.

ATTACHMENT THEORY

Background

Attachment theory was originally developed by John Bowlby and was based on his observational studies of children who experienced separation from their parents during World War II (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). Bowlby was also influenced by ethological theories that explore similarities and differences in behavior across species. Ultimately he argued that attachment processes outlined in the theory are evident in nonhuman as well as human primates, and serve an adaptive function for the survival of the species. Although Bowlby developed his theory as something of an alternative to the orthodox psychodynamic view of child development that was articulated by Sigmund Freud, Bowlby’s thinking still preserves many of the trappings of psychodynamic ideology.

Bowlby observed that human infants are innately driven to seek out and remain in close proximity to their primary caregivers. Indeed, this pattern of behavior is typical of most primates. Bowlby (1973) characterized attachment behavior as “any form of behavior that results in a person attaining or retaining proximity to some other differentiated and preferred individual” (p. 292). This type of behavior is viewed as “hardwired” into the brain. That is to say, people do not need to learn proximity seeking to the caregiver. Rather, this tendency is already present at birth. Bowlby felt that this pattern of behavior was the result of natural selection. Because it is adaptive to the survival of the species, those who did not seek the proximity of a caregiver as an infant were less likely to survive and pass on their genes.

Functions of Attachment

As noted earlier, attachment processes between the infant and primary caregiver are assumed to be functional. Bowlby argued that attachment is adaptive to the survival of the species. His writings highlight four distinct functions that are served by attachment, all of which appear to be beneficial to the infant’s survival and development. Perhaps the most basic function of attachment is *proximity seeking*. Infants have an innate tendency to seek out their primary caregiver. Given that this person is the source of protection and nourishment, it is obvious how this tendency serves the infant’s best interests. *Separation protest* is a second function of attachment. This simply implies that the infant will resist separation from his or her primary caregiver. Behaviorally, it is evident in crying and screaming when the infant is separated from the caregiver. The *safe haven* function refers to the tendency to seek out the caregiver in times of stress or danger. Eventually children will explore their environment apart from their parents. However, attachment will readily send the child back to the presence of the parent for protection during times of stress. Finally, the *secure base* function indicates that an attachment that is felt as secure will motivate or allow the child to explore his or her environment, beyond immediate contact with the caregiver. The idea is that the secure attachment with the caregiver provides a sort of psychological foundation on which the child can mount an exploration into the unknown elements of his or her environment. If the child knows in the back of his or her mind that the caregiver is available for protection, exploration of the environment is not felt to

be as risky. All of these functions of attachment should keep the infant out of harm's way and in the presence of the individual who can shelter, protect, and nourish. There can be little doubt about the adaptive nature of such processes. Infants (or animals) who enact attachment behaviors are most likely to survive the perils of early development and grow into functional adults.

Working Models and Attachment Styles

In attachment theory, interactions between the infant and his or her primary caregiver (usually the mother) become the basis for internal *working models*. These are mental representations that summarize and organize interactions between the self and the caregiver. Early attachment experiences contribute to both internal working models of the self and internal working models of others. In the self model, the child views him- or herself as either worthy or unworthy of love and support. Experiences with a parent who is warm and responsive would obviously lead to an internal working model of the self as worthy of love. However, if early childhood experiences with the caregiver are marked by coldness and unavailability, the child will come to view the self as unworthy of love and support. As Reis and Patrick (1996) wisely observed, "just how this internalization occurs remains one of the most important and unresolved issues in attachment research" (p. 526). Internal working models of others are a mental representation of the benevolence of other people. Other models are something of a prototype of other human beings and how they can be expected to treat the child. These representations are summarized along themes of availability, responsiveness, and trustworthiness. Essentially, the child will generalize from experiences with the primary caregiver, and assume that this is how most people will treat him or her. According to attachment theory, once these internal working models are established, which may happen as early as age 1 or 2, they are relatively stable throughout the remainder of the lifespan.

Obviously, different children have different internal working models of the self and others. These various internal working models become the foundation for attachment styles. Bowlby felt that the nature of the caregiver's response to the child was the dominant factor that determined the infant's attachment style. Originally, attachment theorists suggested that there were three distinct attachment styles (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987). People with a *secure* attachment style had caregivers who were responsive to their needs, available, and affectionate. Those with an *anxious-avoidant* attachment style had early interactions with caregivers who were cold, not nurturing, and unavailable. If the primary caregiver was inconsistent or unpredictable in his or her responsiveness to the child, the child was thought to develop an *anxious-ambivalent* attachment style. Research on attachment theory has shown that infants with different attachment styles will behave differently around their mothers (Ainsworth, Blehar, Walters, & Wall, 1978). For example, infants with a secure attachment will gladly explore their environment when in the presence of their mothers. Upon separation they become distressed but then readily settle back down when reunited with their mothers. Infants with an anxious-avoidant attachment style tend to avoid close contact with their mothers and keep to themselves. Finally, the anxious-ambivalent infants will exhibit extreme distress upon separation from their mothers. However, when reunited these children show signs of anger and ambivalence.

Later, a four category scheme of attachment styles was proposed, based on positive and negative models of the self and others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). In this model, early experiences with caregivers are thought to produce internal working models of the self that are generally positive (worthy of love and acceptable to others) or negative (unworthy of love, unacceptable to others). At the same time, children are assumed to develop internal working models of others that are either positive (others are trustworthy and available) or negative (others are unreliable and rejecting). When the internal working models of the self and others are crossed, there are four possible attachment styles: *secure*, *preoccupied*, *dismissing*, and *fearful*. These are depicted in Figure 2.1.

| | | MODEL OF SELF | |
|-----------------|----------|--|--|
| | | Positive | Negative |
| MODEL OF OTHERS | Positive | <p>SECURE</p> <p>Comfortable with intimacy and autonomy</p> | <p>PREOCCUPIED</p> <p>Preoccupied with relationships</p> |
| | Negative | <p>DISMISSING</p> <p>Dismissing of intimacy Counter-dependent</p> | <p>FEARFUL</p> <p>Fearful of intimacy Socially avoidant</p> |

Figure 2.1 The Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) model of attachment styles.

Note. From Bartholomew, K., & Horowitz, L.M. Attachment styles among young adults: A test of a four category model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 61, 226–244 (1991). Published by the American Psychological Association and adapted with permission.

As evident in Figure 2.1, the four category scheme preserves the secure attachment style of the original three category scheme. However, it divides the avoidant styles into two substyles: the dismissing and the fearful. In each case the internal working model of others is negative, but in the dismissing style the internal working model of the self is positive, whereas it is negative in the fearful style. It should be noted that this scheme was developed and validated largely on young adults. One might wonder how, for example, a person develops a positive internal working model of the self but a negative model of others. Infants appear much more readily willing to internalize the negative behavior of others as a negative reflection on the self. However, people who start out in life with a positive view of the self, but then have a string of bad experiences with others, could plausibly maintain their positive view of the self while holding a more negative view of other people. Note that this explanation hinges on the person’s ability to *not* always internalize the negative actions of others as a poor reflection on the self. This undoubtedly entails a more adult way of thinking about the social world and its relation to the self.

Attachment theorists and researchers continue to explore different ways to measure and represent attachment styles. Some are now using dimensional scores to represent attachment, rather than specific categorical styles (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2009). The two major dimensions of attachment that are assessed in such a scheme are attachment-related *avoidance* and attachment-related *anxiety*. Avoidance is a preference for emotional distance and a discomfort with closeness. Anxiety is a desire for protection and closeness and a concern with the availability of a partner. Obviously, people who score low on both of these dimensions would be considered securely attached.

Evaluation and Application to Family Communication

Embedded within attachment theory are some very powerful ideas and statements about family communication early in life. According to Bowlby, the nature of the parent–infant interaction sets a template for social relationships that the child will carry with him or her for life. Notably, much of this early parent–child communication is nonverbal. As children grow older, their attachment figures shift from parents to romantic partners and spouses (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Reis & Patrick, 1996). This implies that communication patterns in the family of origin may be revisited in some way in the family of orientation. For example, people with secure attachment styles have a tendency to end up in traditional or independent marriages, whereas those with dismissing or preoccupied styles are more likely to be in separate style marriages (Fitzpatrick, Fey, Segrin, & Schiff, 1993) (see chapter 6 for a discussion of the different marital types). Those with a secure attachment style are also more likely to report high marital satisfaction compared to those with other styles of attachment (Feeney, 2002; Feeney, Noller, & Callan, 1994; Meyers & Landsberger, 2002). A positive view of the self (i.e., secure

or dismissive attachment style) is positively associated with family outcomes such as perceived rewards from marriage and parenting (Vasquez, Durik, & Hyde, 2002). Finally, secure attachment has been linked with less destructive marital conflict patterns and more positive attitudes toward parenting (Cohn, Silver, Cowan, Cowan, & Pearson, 1992; Feeney, Noller, & Roberts, 2000). Findings such as these are useful for employing attachment theory as an explanation for the effects of family of origin experiences on later family of orientation experiences. They also draw attention to the critical role of parent–child communication in the early years of life. Even preverbal children appear very attuned and attentive to their parents' style of relating to them. This early parental communication evidently leads to self-concept development and views of the trustworthiness of others that impacts later communication patterns and relationships.

Attachment theory has been very useful for explaining why people with a history of childhood abuse often find themselves in abusive relationships as adults. This noxious form of parent–child communication has been linked with a host of negative social and psychological outcomes later in life (see chapters 14 and 16 for a more in-depth analysis). An abused child would be expected to develop a negative internal working model of the self and therefore not feel worthy of love from others. Perhaps the child even feels that abusive conduct from others is somehow deserved or warranted. This sets up a mental representation of close relationships as normatively including abusive behavior. When such a child grows older and begins seeking romantic partners, attachment theorists speculate that this mental model of close relationships causes the person to, perhaps unknowingly, seek out others who will be abusive. In so doing, they recreate their childhood experiences and settle into a social life that is at once painful but familiar.

It would not be an exaggeration to state that attachment theory has been subject to hundreds of studies in the past 30 years. Researchers have used attachment styles to explain so many different phenomena that it begins to strain the imagination of the reader and credibility of the theory. The eagerness with which researchers have studied attachment styles in recent times appears to be fueled by a variable-analytic mentality in which the search is on for any phenomenon, concept, or experience that varies as a function of attachment styles. Regardless of the utility of this approach, it obviously indicates the current mass appeal of attachment theory in the social and behavioral sciences.

One assumption of attachment theory that has been hotly debated is the stability of attachment styles. Bowlby argued that the attachment styles formed in childhood are enduring throughout the lifespan. However, some scientists disagree with this assumption. For example, Coyne (1999) has been critical of theories that characterize early childhood experiences as frozen in time like the Woolly Mammoth, unable to be changed. Rather, Coyne argues that we have experiences throughout the lifespan that are influential in developing and changing our interpersonal perspectives. Further, he argues that early childhood experiences have only modest associations with later adult experiences such as depression. In the research literature there is at least suggestive support for the stability of internal working models and attachment styles over time (e.g., Bram, Gallant, & Segrin, 1999; Feeney et al., 2000). However, when attachment style is measured categorically (e.g., secure, dismissive, etc.), about 25% of respondents appear to change their attachment style over periods of 1–4 years (Feeney & Noller, 1996). In an analysis over the course of six years, researchers found more fluidity than stability in attachment styles (Zhang & Labouvie-Vief, 2004). Further, people may experience a different attachment style depending on the relationship. When considering their ten “most important” relationships, 88% of respondents reported that these relationships corresponded with at least two attachment styles, and 47% reported correspondence with three attachment styles (Baldwin, Keelan, Gehr, Enns, & Koh-Rangarajoo, 1996). If attachment styles change over time and by relationship, the fundamental importance of parent–child interaction in setting the stage for later relationships that is postulated by attachment theory could be seriously questioned.

THE DIALECTICAL PERSPECTIVE

Every year, millions of Americans travel home to their family of origin during the holiday season. In most cases people seem eager to reunite with family members and spend time with them. Often, after a week or so, people return back to their homes, jobs, school, etc., and seem as eager to get back to their life away from the family of origin as they were to see the family members in the first place. Why does it happen that, at one moment people want to be united with their family members, and at the next they want to leave family members behind and get back to school or work? The dialectical perspective (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, 1997) explains that these seeming contradictions are an inherent part of our relationships with other people. Even though the dialectical approach describes forces that operate in virtually all relationships, family theorists have found its principles and ideas to be very useful for explaining the form and function of family relationships.

Contradiction in Family Relationships

In the dialectical perspective, contradictions are seen as an inherent aspect of any relationship. Contradictions cause changes in our relationships and they keep relationships growing instead of remaining static. They are relational forces that are unified opposites. By “unified,” Baxter and Montgomery (1997) suggest that the opposing relational forces are interdependent. In other words, the meaning or experience of one force is dependent upon the other. For example, if one lived in a tropical climate where the outdoor temperature was consistently between 70–90 degrees, is there any such thing as it being “hot” or “cold” outside? For people who live in the Midwestern United States where the weather can range from 0–100 degrees, “hot” and “cold” have obvious and clear meanings. The point is that the experience of “hot” takes on meaning relative to its alternative: “cold.” If there was no such thing as “cold,” “hot” would not be very meaningful.

What are some of the contradictions, or unified opposites, that play a part in family life? One example cited by Baxter and Montgomery (1996) is *autonomy versus connectedness*. Reconsider the example given above about the family reunion over the holidays. In all close relationships, there is an obvious desire for a sense of “connectedness” between the members of the relationship. This might be established and maintained though sharing time and space, engaging in conversation, and engaging in joint activities. Without any of these, it would be hard to say that there is much of a relationship at all. However, there are very few people who want to spend 24 hours a day together. Even the closest married couples or the most attached parent–child dyads seem to desire some time on their own. Consequently, family members must strike a balance in their relationships, over time, between connectedness and separateness. These opposing forces that impinge on the relationship are known as *dialectic tensions*. Other dialectic tensions that must be managed in family relationships include *novelty versus predictability*, *disclosure versus privacy*, *stability versus change*, and *conventionality versus uniqueness* (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Bochner & Eisenberg, 1987). According to the dialectical approach, these oppositional forces are balanced by different families in different ways. Rarely are they handled with an “either/or” approach.

Before leaving the topic of contradictions, it is important to note that the opposing forces described in the dialectical approach are not located in the struggle between one person and another. Rather, Baxter and Montgomery note that these oppositional forces are part of the *relationship*. In other words, they are relational, not individual, forces. In a mother–daughter relationship, the disclosure–privacy dialectic is not an issue of the mother expecting and offering full disclosure while the daughter expects and maintains full privacy. That would be an antagonism between individuals. Rather, this is a relational force that each must manage. There are surely some things that the mother wants to disclose to the daughter and some things that she would like to keep private. Similarly, the daughter would also want to disclose some things

to her mother and keep some matters to herself. This dialectical tension calls on the mother and daughter to balance their desires for disclosure and privacy in a way that is comfortable for their relationship. Most people who have been in such a family relationship can attest to the difficulty of negotiating this dialectic tension.

Praxis and Praxis Patterns

According to the dialectical perspective, “people are at once both actors and objects of their own action” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1997, p. 329). This concept is called *praxis*. People consciously and often freely make choices about how they choose to treat their family members. This is abundantly evident in messages that are sent from one family member to another. At the same time, sent messages and communication patterns have a way of influencing the relationship in such a way as to impact the original message sender. Consider, for example, a parent with an anger management problem. If the parent expresses anger with his child through enacting physical violence, he could be seen as a sender of dysfunctional verbal and nonverbal communication but, at the same time, he will be *acted on* by his own communication. Assume for example that the Child Protective Services were made aware of the abuse, took the child from the family home, and had the father arrested. Suddenly, his act of communication has massive consequences that come back and act upon him and his relationship with the child.

Different relationships use different mechanisms for managing the dialectical tensions that they experience. These mechanisms or tactics are called *praxis patterns*. Baxter and Montgomery (1996, 1997) divide these tactics into those that are dysfunctional and those that are functional. One of the common but dysfunctional praxis patterns is *denial*. Here, members of the relationship simply deny the presence of the contradiction by only honoring one of the poles while excluding the other. In a family that felt the opposing forces of conventionality and uniqueness, family members would be using denial if they simply ignored the pull for uniqueness and honored only the drive for conventionality. Another dysfunctional praxis pattern is *disorientation*. This happens when there is no real “management” of the oppositional forces in the relationship. Rather, members of the relationship resign themselves to the fact that these contradictory motives are inevitable and negative. Consequently, they are likely to find themselves in double bind situations where any behavior or communication will feel like it clashes with one of the opposing relational forces.

Baxter and Montgomery (1996, 1997) have also identified a series of more functional praxis patterns. These are more effective means for managing the dialectical tensions in such a way as to minimize negative relational outcomes. One functional praxis pattern called *spiraling alternation* involves alternating between the opposite poles of a dialectic at different points in time. For example, every Sunday family members may get together for dinner, honoring connectedness, but it may be understood that on Saturday nights everyone is free to do their own thing or go out with their friends, honoring the desire for autonomy. In *segmentation* members of the relationship honor opposing poles of the dialectic, not over time, but over topic or activity domain. For example, a family might be very open when it comes to discussing spiritual beliefs and finances, but very private when it comes to discussing sexuality. By having open communication on some topics and treating others with a “hands off” attitude the family alternates between the two poles of the disclosure–privacy dialectic. *Balance* is a praxis pattern in which members of the relationship try to respond to both ends of the opposition by seeking a compromise. One problem with balance is that neither polarity is fully satisfied at any point in time. *Integration* is something of an ideal in conflict resolution and management of dialectical tensions. When members of a relationship integrate, they find a way of simultaneously satisfying both polarities of a dialectical tension. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) suggest that in some cases family dinnertime can be seen as an integration praxis pattern in which the family bond is established and maintained, and yet individual actions and accomplishments are recognized and embraced through the input of individual members into the interaction. With *recalibration*

members of the relationship create “a transformation in the expressed form of the contradiction such that the opposing forces are no longer regarded as oppositional to one another” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 65). With this praxis pattern, members of the relationship find a way to reframe the contradiction “such that the polarities are encompassed in one another” (p. 65). The phrase “if you love something, set it free” may be a reflection of this mentality. By freeing one’s partner to behave as he or she will, members of a relationship can experience security through that freedom. Finally, the praxis pattern of *reaffirmation* “celebrates the richness afforded by each polarity and tolerates the tension posed by their unity” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 66). In some ways, the “for better or worse” part of a marriage vow may represent reaffirmation for some married couples. If the couple accepts both the good times and the bad, and realizes that they will have a better and stronger relationship as a result of working through each, they may be enacting a reaffirmation praxis pattern.

Evaluation and Application to Family Communication

The dialectical approach has proven to be very useful to family theorists and researchers who are interested in explaining various family processes and tasks. For example, the work of Bochner and Eisenberg (1987), which predated the formal development of the dialectical approach, argued that there are two dialectical tensions that are central to family functioning. They characterize the first as *integration versus differentiation*. All families are made up of individuals with their own unique identities. At the same time, families as a collective unit have an identity. One task that faces all families is honoring the desire for a collective identity as a family unit versus allowing individuals within the family to develop their own unique identities as individuals, or their own unique relationships with other family member (e.g., mother–daughter, between two siblings, etc.). Another dialectic that has a substantial impact on family functioning according to Bochner and Eisenberg (1987) is *stability versus change*. Most families have predictable patterns of interaction. These might be reflected in activities such as the family dinner, picking up children from school, or watching television together in the evening. Some degree of predictability is desirable for most families. On the other hand, too much stability in the family can lead to stagnation. As families evolve through time, they experience changes that are internal to the system (e.g., birth of a child) and changes that are external to the system (e.g., societal changes). There is some need to adapt to these changes, but without entirely abandoning the family’s traditions and destroying any sense of predictability in family interaction. According to Bochner and Eisenberg (1987), managing these two important dialects are significant tasks that families must address in order to maintain their integrity.

The work of Bochner and Eisenberg (1987) shows how the assumptions and ideas of the dialectical approach can be fruitfully employed for describing certain family processes. At the same time, the dialectical approach does not have all of the elements of a formal theory such as social learning theory. For this reason it more difficult to use the dialectical approach for prediction or intervention to change or improve family functioning. Baxter (2006) explicitly eschews these as valid criteria for evaluating the utility of relational dialectics. The majority of its utility is in *explaining* the nature of family relationships. Also, some of the concepts in the dialectical perspective can be difficult to grasp, much less identify in a practical setting. For example, the praxis patterns of integration, recalibration, and reaffirmation are somewhat vaguely conceptualized and therefore difficult to observe or identify in an actual family setting. Further, these praxis patterns may not be as common as other praxis patterns such as denial, segmentation, or balance.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we explored several theories that are and have been very influential in the field of family science. These general theories have inspired hundreds of research studies and

numerous more specific theories that draw on many of the postulates of the theories presented here. We started by examining *family systems theory*. According to this perspective, family processes can only be understood by examining the family in its totality. All family processes and events are thought to be connected to the larger family system and social suprasystem in which the family itself resides. Families are assumed to have emergent qualities that make them more than just the sum of their individual parts. *Symbolic interaction theory* highlights the vital role of the family in creating self-concepts and understandings of the world. Symbolic interaction theorists feel that meaning is at least to some extent negotiated through our interactions with other people. Because the family is the primary source of social interactions and relationships, it has a monumental role in shaping people's self-concepts and what it means to be a father, sister, grandmother, etc. Although meanings are negotiated through social interactions over the entire lifespan, the process starts in the family. *Social learning theory* explains how people acquire behaviors through observing other people perform behaviors, along with the consequences that they experience subsequent to the behavior. Learning by modeling is a fundamental process in social learning theory. When people observe a model perform a behavior and get rewarded for doing so, they are likely to start performing the behavior themselves. Like symbolic interaction theory, social learning theory has obvious applications to family interaction because the family provides a multitude of compelling models for children to observe. *Attachment theory* focuses on early infant–caregiver interactions as the basis for forming enduring internal working models of interpersonal relationships. An internal working model is a mental representation of the self as worthy or unworthy of love and attention and others as reliable and trustworthy or rejecting and uncaring. Attachment theorists feel that the nature of early interactions with a caregiver will inform young children's internal working models which then influence the nature of their interpersonal relationships well into adulthood. Finally, we examined the *dialectical perspective*. This approach to understanding family processes is built around dialectical tensions or functional contradictions that are an inherent part of any family relationship. In the dialectical perspective, family members are seen as having to balance or manage tensions such as connectedness–separateness, stability–change, and novelty–predictability. The dialectical perspective also explains how families manage dialectical tensions through a variety of techniques known as praxis patterns.

Of all the theories discussed in this chapter, only *family systems theory* was explicitly developed as an explanation of family dynamics (although it was derived from the more general version of systems theory). All of the other theories were developed as explanations of more general interpersonal processes. However, the family either plays a prominent role in the reasoning of the theory (as in attachment theory) or the theory has obvious and immediate applicability to the family. In either case, scholars have seized upon these theories as some of their primary tools for explaining and understanding family interactions and relationships. Throughout the remainder of this book, we will present numerous specific applications of these influential theories. Their continued application to the understanding of issues such as child abuse, alcoholism in the family, marital satisfaction, divorce, and parent–child interaction is a testimony to the utility of these family interaction theories.

3 Family Interaction Patterns

Norms and Networks, Routines and Rituals, Stories and Secrets

Even as the media, research, and real-life experiences prompt people to face the many problems in family life, the notion of “family time” is still idealized in American culture. Musicians sing about it. Ziggy Marley has a whole album titled *Family Time* (2009). Companies promote it as a marketing hook (Bulik, 2007). Buy a Dodge or Chrysler minivan and you will have a “family room on wheels.” Watch the Parade of Dreams at Disneyland and the Phil Collins lyrics “Welcome to our family time” pace the passing of the characters. People even turn down jobs to spend more time with their families, as did former head coach, Brent Sutter, of the New Jersey Devils hockey team (Allen, 2009). The “family thing” is so revered in our society that people have invoked the “more time with family” excuse as a face-saving way to quit a job before getting fired (Rivenburg, 2002). Each year people make resolutions to spend more family time together: to eat dinner together more often, to spend more time talking to their children, to take a family vacation. Why are so many people in the constant pursuit of more family time? What is “family time” anyway? And what really matters? Is it the *quantity* of time spent interacting with family members and/or the *quality* and symbolic meaning of the interaction?

We begin this chapter by studying family interaction norms and networks, that is, who talks to whom and with what frequency and quantity. Then, much of the rest of the chapter is devoted to studying the quality of communication in patterns of family interaction. Analysis of family routines is one way of revealing the patterns that emerge in family interaction. Often these patterns become ritualized, such that they take on symbolic meaning. In rituals, the actual interaction is less important than what the interaction symbolizes.

The symbolic content of family interaction is also revealed and reconstructed in the stories family members tell and the secrets they keep. Even as people are “just talking” about the events and routines in their lives, they are telling stories and censoring information. Family stories can function to socialize members, affirm belonging and connect generations, and present implicit or explicit judgments about behavior. Naturally, in this chapter, we explore the functions of family stories and how they vary by type and narrative form. Some family stories purposely leave out information. This leads us to a discussion of family secrets. Family members make complex decisions about what to tell and criteria for when and whom to tell. Together, rituals, stories, and secrets are the types of family interaction that create a symbolic identity for the family. As we discussed in chapter 2, families exhibit the systems theory concept of nonsummativity. That is, the family is more than the sum of its parts. All these symbolic forms of interaction combine to create the family’s spirit, identity, and its relationship to the outside world (Steinglass, Bennett, Wolin, & Reiss, 1987).

INTERACTION NORMS, NETWORKS, AND CLIMATES

Historical Perspective

According to Daly (2001), the concept of “family time” is a relatively new notion. The notion stems from Victorian times and peaked in the family-centered decade of the 1950s. Prior to industrialized technology, almost all time was spent with the family. Parents and children lived and worked in their family units, unless they were sent to live as a servant or apprentice in another family’s home (Coontz, 2000). Even though few mothers worked outside the home, much of their time was intensely devoted to running the family farm or business. The advent of “wage labor under the factory system not only separated the public sphere of paid labor from the private domain of personal meanings, but also bracketed family time as different from work time” (Daly, 2001, p. 284). Daly further explains that the privileged class in late 19th century Victorian Protestant culture popularized leisure and family time by making the family dinner and children’s bedtime serve as communication rituals. The living room parlor became a place for family conversation, and Sundays became a day for family time and rest from work that took one away from the family.

What is Family Time?

To say that family time is different from work time does not really describe what family time is. When people talk about it, they express idiosyncratic definitions of family time. Daly (2001) warns that this usually involves some romanticized ideal of family togetherness, positive interactions, and child-centeredness. Family time is romanticized as time together that involves everyone having fun or strengthening bonds of intimacy. When lay persons use the phrase “spending family time together,” it rarely refers to negative interactions (e.g., eating dinner together in an atmosphere of tension and underlying conflict, as do the family in the film *American Beauty*). Furthermore, the phrase is not usually meant for time spent together doing mundane or less enjoyable tasks such as cleaning the house. Clearly, there is a difference between what society romanticizes as family time and the total amount of time that family members spend together. Lay people’s way of distinguishing family time was to develop the phrase “quality time,” which is different from ordinary or negatively-toned family interactions (Shaw, 1992). More recently, Snyder (2007) found that when asked what “quality time” with their families means, parents usually offer one of three distinct definitions: “structured-planning parents felt quality time was planned family activities, child-centered parents saw it as heart-to-heart talks, and time-available parents believed that all the time they spent with their families while at home was quality time” (p. 320).

Operational definitions of family time in research are far from the romanticized or idiosyncratic definitions of family time that individuals have in mind (Barnett, 1998). In fact, scholars rarely use the terms family time or quality time. They instead study more specific variables, usually related to the quantity of time adults or parents spend at work or how much time children spend watching television. As Sandberg and Hofferth (2001) note, researchers know far more about the *quantity* of time families spend in specific activities than they do about the *quality* of time family members spend together because data on quality of time are more difficult to collect on a large scale.

Interaction Norms: Quantity of Time Together

Observation is the most accurate way to determine how much time family members spend together. But observational methods are usually too intrusive, costly, and time intensive. The most valid and reliable alternative involves time diaries, which also have drawbacks related to self-report bias. Respondents are asked, for example, to report on their activities in 24-hour

periods. They record information about their activities, time spent in each activity, and the people involved in the activity. Sandberg and Hofferth (2001) found an *increase* in the time parents in two-parent families spent with children from 1981 to 1997. The data come from two separate time diary studies (in 1981 and 1997), both conducted at the University of Michigan with similar but not identical methodology (see also Sandberg & Hofferth, 2005). “[B]ut these increases are not paralleled for children in single-parent families,” such that parent–child time together in single-parent families remained fairly stable over the two studies (Sandberg & Hofferth, 2001, p. 434). When collapsing all family types together, in 1997 children had their mothers accessible to them for 41.57 hours per week, and with their fathers accessible to them for 22.68 hours per week (Sandberg & Hofferth, 2005). Of that accessible time per week, mothers spent 20.93 hours directly participating with their child, and fathers spent 11.96 hours directly participating (Sandberg & Hofferth, 2005).

Societal Influences on Family Interaction Norms

It is difficult to understand how some parents could be spending a similar amount or even more time with children than in previous decades when there appears to be so much data supporting the thesis that Americans today are overworked, overscheduled, and that the amount of hours that adults spend in the labor force has increased over the last four decades (Darrah, Freeman, English-Lueck, 2007; Hochschild, 1997). Contrary to popular belief, there are some well supported arguments to explain how parents might be accomplishing this task. Jacobs and Gerson (2001) clarify that overall changes in working time are actually modest, but appear dramatic for several reasons. First, the increased participation of women in the workforce makes it appear that work time is increasing for all individuals, when the notable changes are occurring mostly for women. Increases in women’s working hours do not necessarily translate to fewer parent–child interactions as fathers can adjust their work schedules to compensate for the mother’s increased time at work, and as fathers now desire to be more involved in their children’s lives than in decades such as the 1950s. This may be the case in some two-parent families where mothers are working.

Jacobs and Gerson (2001) also argue that only some mothers are spending more time in the labor force. In other words, only some segments of the population have increased work hours, whereas other segments of the population have similar work hours or just modest changes from previous decades. One segment of the population that appears to be working more are the highly educated workers who hold prestigious jobs and occupations. Jacobs and Gerson highlight the pressure for these workers to log incredibly long workweeks. Further, there are even solid arguments that time spent doing housework is declining. Housework is either left undone or outsourced, and time once devoted to housework may be directed toward interacting with family members instead.

One of the strongest forces to affect parental time with children is childrearing trends. Although individualism is still prized highly in the U.S., trends of child-centered parenting encourage parents to spend more time with children (Alwin, 1996). That is, even if some mothers are working more, they simultaneously make it a priority to devote more of the time they do have to their children. Overall, even though some structural reasons, such as single-parent families and maternal labor participation, relate negatively to parent–child time, these structural changes are balanced by behavioral changes (Sandberg & Hofferth, 2001).

Benefits of Family Time

What is the big deal with spending family time together? Time spent in family activities is assumed to promote positive relationships and individual development. There is a fair amount of research to suggest this is the case, or at least that there is a reciprocal relationship between the two. Children who eat more regular family meals together engage in fewer high

risk behaviors (i.e., less substance abuse and sexual activity) and have fewer behavior problems (i.e., depression/suicide, school problems, violence, binge eating/purging) (Eisenberg, 2008; Fulkerson, 2006; Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001). The dependability of the ritual and the interaction during the family meals may work to soothe daily stressors of children and adolescents, that is, if the dinner table offers a context to discuss events of the day or offer emotional support.

Time spent in shared leisure activities is also positively associated with family satisfaction (Orthner & Mancini, 1990; Smith, Freeman, & Zabriskie, 2009), likely for many of the same reasons. In the parent-child relationship, most communication occurs during another activity. In 1997, children spent only 45 minutes per week where sitting and talking was the main activity (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001). At a time when youth sport participation has been critiqued for the reason that children's time is becoming overscheduled, Eichenauer (2008) discovered a positive communication side effect of moderate youth sport involvement. The time that parents and children spend in a vehicle transporting the child to and from soccer practice, for example, presents a unique context for them to talk about events of the day and experiences related to sport, *if* they take advantage of the focused time together.

Time spent in joint activities also appears to be positively related to the relational satisfaction of intimate partners, particularly when there are opportunities for interaction (Baxter & Dindia, 1990; Orthner & Mancini, 1990; Presser, 2000). Married couples have been estimated to spend anywhere from 1 hour and 15 minutes to 2 hours and 45 minutes conversing on a daily basis (Kirchler, 1989). Further, happy couples spend more time discussing events of the day and personal topics than unhappy couples. Social interaction is the glue that holds relationships together, but couples have many distractions that prevent interaction. Presser (2000) found, for example, that nonstandard work schedules are correlated with marital instability because the work schedule discourages interaction time and quality. "Specifically, it was the night and rotating shifts that significantly increased the odds of marital instability, and this was only for couples with children" (Presser, 2000, p. 107). It may be extremely difficult to get sleep during the day when children are present. Lack of sleep leads to physiological stress and in turn exacerbates marital tensions and the quality of communication between partners and children.

Confusing Quantity and Quality of Time

The developing thesis is that the *quality* of social interaction trumps *quantity*. According to Guldner and Swenson (1995), the argument that increased time together causes increased relationship satisfaction is empirically very suspect. Research on commuter marriages (Govaerts & Dixon, 1988), long-distance romantic relationships (Guldner & Swenson, 1995; Maguire, 2007), and couples separated by military careers (Merolla & Steinberg, 2007; Pavalko & Elder, 1990) indicates no necessary relationship between satisfaction and geographic separation. When people in long-distance romantic relationships have at least some limited opportunities for face-to-face interaction, have access to communication through technology, believe there will be an end to their separation, and have the cognitive capacity to keep the relationship "alive and well" in their minds, they experience no more uncertainty, trust, jealousy, or dissatisfaction than persons in geographically close relationships. In a final example, when Reissman, Aron, and Bergen (1993) experimentally increased the amount of time married couples spent together and compared them to a control group, they found no greater increase in satisfaction for those couples who were instructed to spend more time together.

Unfortunately, some research has overgeneralized the idea that any time spent together is positive for relationships. When this assumption is tested, it becomes clear that it is not the activity, but the interaction and subjective feelings generated during the activity that affects

couple or family satisfaction. For example, for years scholars have overgeneralized that spouses' joint pursuit of leisure activities enhances their satisfaction with marriage. However, Crawford, Houts, Huston, and George (2002) found evidence to the contrary when they followed couples over a decade studying how much time they spent in joint and separate leisure activities, and whether they liked the activities in which they participated. They found that the joint pursuit of activities that both spouses liked was positively related to a husbands' satisfaction (but not the wives'). Further, when husbands pursued activities they liked, either with or without their wives, and their wives disliked the activity, both their own satisfaction and that of their wives decreased (Crawford, et al., 2002, p. 448). For instance, if a husband likes playing golf, but his wife does not, their marital satisfaction takes a toll, whether he plays alone or with her.

As we have found in our own research, the exhibition of socially skilled interactions and perceptions of partner positivity during leisure time make such time together more satisfying (Flora & Segrin, 1998). Although positive interactions could happen in a variety of activities, Flora and Segrin (1998) manipulated couples' activity types in the lab to see whether certain leisure activities promoted more positive interaction than others. Couples in the study were randomly assigned to participate in one of three activities (1) relax on the couch together, (2) play a vertical checkers game in which there were negative consequences for losing, or (3) watch a popular TV show together. These activities were found to vary particularly in the amount of social interaction and competitiveness they elicited. Overall, of the three activities, relaxing on the couch was most satisfying to couples, likely because it produced more opportunities for high quality interaction. But surely couples can find rewarding interaction in a variety of activities, and some couples are so dissatisfied that not even the best of activities can elicit positive communication. Thus more time together and more communication do not necessarily translate to better relationships.

Interaction Networks: Who Talks to Whom?

Family interactions can also be conceptualized as a network. Family communication networks attempt to model who talks to whom in the family and with what frequency. The concept of family networks has been applied to two-generation families (i.e., networks involving parents and children) as well as multigenerational families (i.e., extended family networks). Galvin, Byland, and Brommel (2004) describe network structures that are useful for describing two-generation family networks. Although these network structures have not been the subject of much empirical research, they are descriptively heuristic. In a *centralized interaction network*, one member of the family acts as the hub of communication. This member talks to every other member and then passes information along to the rest of the family. The central member keeps the family in touch, since the rest of the members do not talk to each other with as much frequency, if at all. Two types of centralized structures are the *wheel network* and the *Y-network*. In the wheel network, the central member at the hub connects all the rest of the members at the spokes of the wheel. Everyone communicates through the one key figure. In the Y-network, the central member acts as gatekeeper. The gatekeeper talks to every other member, but only allows some messages to get through to members. The Y-structure depicts one or two members who are kept out of the loop of information, upon the discretion of the gatekeeper.

Decentralized networks do not have one single member who is the hub of information. In one type of decentralized network, the *all-channel network*, everyone talks to everyone else with similar frequency. It is common for members to share information with several members, sometimes repeating the same story over again. It is not uncommon for families with an all-channel network to discuss things all together. In the decentralized *chain network*, family members relay messages through a chain of family members. Although there is not one central member, alliances exist such that some members will only talk to certain other members.

Members on opposite ends of the communication chain may rarely or never talk to each other. Any information they have about the opposite member is filtered through the chain of members in between.

Interaction Climates: Quality of Communication

Family Communication Climates

McLeod and Chaffee (1972) suggested that, over time, families establish a communication climate, though this climate can change over the years. Two fundamental communication orientations contribute to this environment. Ritchie and Fitzpatrick (1990; Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994; Ritchie, 1991) later labeled these two orientations the conformity orientation and conversation orientation.

Conformity orientation refers to the degree to which families create a climate that stresses homogeneity of attitudes, values, and beliefs (high conformity) versus heterogeneous attitudes and beliefs, greater individuality, and uniqueness and independence of family members (low conformity) (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997). High conformity interactions also stress harmony, conflict avoidance, interdependence of networks, and obedience to parents (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004). *Conversation orientation* refers to the degree to which family members create a climate where all are encouraged to participate freely and frequently in interaction without limitations regarding time spent and topics discussed (high conversation) versus less frequent interaction with only a few topics that are freely discussed (low conversation) (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997). High conversation families share a lot of activities, thoughts, and feelings (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004).

Based on their conversation and conformity orientation, families can be classified into four types (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994; McLeod & Chaffee, 1972). As depicted by Figure 3.1, families high in conversation and low in conformity are termed *pluralistic*. In pluralistic families, communication is open, frequent and unconstrained, and members are encouraged to think independently. *Consensual* families are characterized by a tension between pressure to agree and an interest in open communication and the exploration of new ideas. Members of *laissez faire* families have few interactions about limited topics. Emotional involvement among members is typically low and members look outside the family for emotional connection. Finally, *protective* families emphasize conformity and obedience.

More recently, the conformity orientation (associated with traditional values, respect for authority, and rules for curbing expression) has been measured using two subscales of Structural Traditionalism and Avoidance in an updated version of the Family Communication

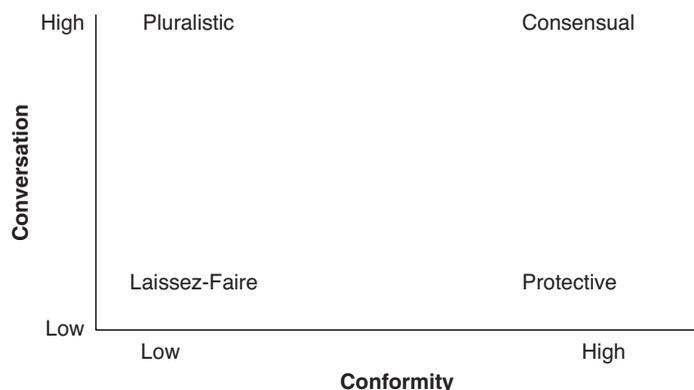


Figure 3.1 Family types based on conversation and conformity orientations.

Environment (FCE) Scale (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994; Baxter, Bylund, Imes, & Scheive, 2005). The conversation orientation (related to accepting and openly confronting conflict) is measured with one Expressiveness subscale on the FCE (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994; Ritchie, 1997).

Being able to measure a family's communication climate has allowed researchers to link the communication climate to other variables. For example, children from high conformity-orientation families appear to be more susceptible to peer pressure, are less willing to test out new ideas at home, and exhibit poorer interpersonal skills in friendships and romantic relationships than children from high conversation-oriented families (Dixon, 1995; Koesten, 2004; Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990). Several recent studies emphasize the benefits of family expressiveness or conversation orientation on overall family satisfaction, family strength, and family members' cognitive flexibility (i.e., awareness of options and willingness to be flexible and adapt) (Koesten, Schrodt, & Ford, 2009; Schrodt, 2009). In turn, structural traditionalism and conflict avoidance (i.e., conformity orientation) have been negatively linked to family strength and satisfaction (Schrodt, 2009).

Also measuring family communication climates, Baxter et al. (2005) concluded that families vary when it comes to communicating rules for controlling children's behavior with regard to health domains (i.e., nutrition, sun protection, sleep, vitamins and medication, exercise, sex, alcohol use, tobacco use, and illegal drug use). Families who were high in expressiveness did not articulate rules as explicitly and valued individual decisions with regard to healthy lifestyle choices. Baxter et al. speculated that highly expressive families may hope that healthy lifestyle choices emerge out of repeated family discussions and other indirect sources such as parental modeling. These highly expressive families also preferred to reward healthy choices rather than rely on heavy negative sanctions for rule violation.

At a very specific level of analysis, some researchers have examined how a family's communication climate is reflected in the speech acts and communication motives used by parents and children alike. For example, conformity-oriented families use more advice, interpretation, and questions, and are more commonly motivated to communicate for personal influence (e.g., control and escape) and affection; whereas conversation-oriented families use more acknowledgement, reflection, and confirmation, and are more motivated to communicate for relationally-oriented reasons (e.g., affection, pleasure, relaxation) (Barbato, Graham, Perse, 2003; Koerner & Cvancara, 2002). Overall, the speech acts of people from high conformity families appear to be more self-oriented compared to the other-oriented nature of people from low conformity families (Koerner & Cvancara, 2002). In chapter 4, we explore how such family communication climates relate to the experience of family conflict.

There are a variety of reasons why families adopt communication orientations toward conformity and conversation. The work of Kohn (1977) and Ritchie (1997) proposes that family communication climates are related in part to educational attainment and the workplace environment of parents. Kohn (1977) initially argued that a process of learning generalization encourages parents to adopt a family interaction pattern that is similar to that of their workplace environment. For example, parents who work in jobs that require conformity and deference to authority will encourage those same values in their children. In the same way, parents who work in jobs that require self-expression, self-direction, and autonomy will encourage those values in their children. Indeed, Ritchie (1997) found that a communication environment in the parents' workplace that favors openness, autonomy, and initiative is related to conversation orientation in the family. Even if parents do not explicitly teach a communication orientation, the family communication climate is a context for implicit modeling and reinforcement (Elwood & Schrader, 1998). According to the learning generalization process, applying work communication patterns to home may be in the best interest of the child. Children will become familiar with the communication patterns that will be useful for them in later social and work environments, assuming they have the same work and educational goals as their parents.

It appears that parents create family communication climates that they feel make sense contextually and culturally for their children, and it is difficult to determine whether parents are doing this intentionally or habitually. This is an important question for immigrant parents who are determining what type of parenting makes sense for their children in a new country with a bicultural identity (Greder & Allen, 2007), a parenting question we pick up in more depth in chapter 7. For now, Shearman and Dumlao (2008) make the case that cultural context and communication climate are intertwined. They found, for example, that young adults from the United States report families with higher conversation orientation compared to their Japanese counterparts. The researchers argue that, in Japan, raising children in a family environment with a low-conversation orientation makes sense given that “self-control, silence (action without words), and other-face concern might be valued more highly than self-expression and explicit communication” (Shearman & Dumlao, 2008, p. 204).

Family Communication Standards

As a counterpart to our discussion of *actual* family communication climates, John Caughlin reveals that people hold standards for how they wish their family communication would be. In his 3-part study on family communication standards, Caughlin (2003) began by using open-ended questions to assess the content of people’s family communication standards. As one might expect, people held a variety of standards, and some articulated multiple standards whereas others reported just one or a few. Caughlin noted that there are inherently idiosyncrasies in family communication standards. An individual’s cultural values, for instance, inform standards of family communication such as openness or avoidance. Caughlin developed a 10-factor measure of the most commonly mentioned standards for “good family communication.” These standards included openness, expression of affection, emotional/instrumental support, politeness, use of appropriate humor/sarcasm, routine interaction, clear and effective discipline, avoidance of personal or hurtful topics, maintenance of structural stability (e.g., “have one person in the family who everyone else always listens to and obeys”), and mindreading (e.g., “know what’s going on in other family members’ lives without asking”). The measure assesses (1) the extent to which an individual endorses any of the 10 most common standards, (2) how the communication in that individual’s family is different from the standard, and (3) whether he or she feels the difference is positive or negative.

Indeed, Caughlin (2003) found that unmet family communication ideals accounted for poorer family satisfaction. Even after accounting for whether the ideals were met or not, simply holding certain relationship-focused ideals, such as openness, expression of affection, emotional/instrumental support, or regular routine interaction, was positively associated with satisfaction. It could be that holding positive relationship standards indicates a motivation to work toward those standards or a heightened satisfaction that a standard held has been fulfilled. The examination of standards and patterns for family network interaction leads to a more in-depth discussion of family routines and rituals.

FAMILY RITUALS AND ROUTINES

Defining Rituals and Routines

A *family ritual* is defined as symbolic communication, “that owing to the satisfaction that family members experience through its repetition, is acted out in a systemic fashion over time” (Wolin & Bennet, 1984, p. 401). In other words, rituals have special meaning that establish and preserve the family’s identity (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004; Wolin & Bennet, 1984). The interaction and behavior related to the ritual symbolize something greater for the family.

“In the context of the family system, it is typically the family unit that in some way is honored in a ritual’s enactment” (Baxter & Clark, 1996, p. 254). A family reunion, for example, involves lots of people who annually gather together to eat food and interact. But these routine behaviors typically take on greater symbolic meaning for the family. For many families, the event symbolizes the perseverance of family unity over generations. Extraordinary family events, like weddings, anniversaries, and funerals, are especially known for taking on ritual status full of symbolic meaning. But even routine, daily events can take on larger ritualistic meaning. For example, the routine of a mother brushing her young daughter’s hair before bed every night can become more than an instrumental task. The task takes on the status of ritual when it is repeatedly enacted as a means of symbolizing something—possibly care, attentiveness, and a time to connect in the relationship.

Rituals are different from *family routines*. Routines are repetitive behaviors that are crucial to the structure of family life, but they lack the symbolism and the “compelling anticipatory nature” that rituals possess (Viere, 2001). Routines are converted to rituals when they move from instrumental to symbolic acts (Fiese et al., 2002). Admittedly, the boundary separating ritual from nonritual is not clear-cut (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). The two are commonly distinguished by the notion that “routines are activities that family members have to do rather than want to do . . . Rituals that lose meaning or become mundane may take on routine status for families” (Viere, 2001, p. 286).

Wolin and Bennett (1984) describe three main types of family rituals: patterned family interactions, family celebrations, and family traditions. *Patterned family interactions* are the least formal but most frequently enacted. They include family regularities such as dinnertime, bedtime, leisure activities, or the treatment of guests in the home, so long as these events have a larger symbolic value. For example, the ritual may symbolize how the family feels about each other and other people, or what appropriate roles and rules are. Imagine a family that ritualizes dinnertime so that certain members prepare the meal, seating around the table is consistent, and children must remain at the table until everyone is finished eating and only then may they ask to be excused. Such a dinnertime ritual may symbolize the family’s roles and rules and honors the family’s unified time together.

Family traditions and family celebrations are more formal than patterned family interactions. *Family traditions* include birthdays, anniversaries, family reunions, and family vacations. The nature of the traditions and the meaning attached to them are unique to each family. For example, some families think an ideal vacation is an annual camping trip to a national park. This type of vacation may be a way for the family to symbolize values such as “working together” to set up camp, “collaboration” to plan hikes and directions, and “family leisure” in a peaceful, natural environment away from phones and television. The unique meaning attached to family traditions is obvious considering that the work and planning of camping is the last way other families would symbolize family leisure. *Family celebrations* are more culture-specific and often follow some relative standardization with other families. They can include rites of passage (e.g., baptisms, graduations, weddings, funerals), religious celebrations (e.g., Christmas, Easter, Passover), and secular holidays (e.g., Thanksgiving). These more formal and infrequent rituals have a variety of functions.

Functions of Family Rituals

Socializing Functions

Rituals of family celebrations are a means of transmitting values. Fiese and Tomcho (2001) found that meaningful aspects of religious holiday rituals are transmitted across generations and have the potential to enhance family relationships. Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz (2005) has developed a body of research to describe how the social construct of marriage becomes poignantly visible to others during moments of public celebrations, such as weddings and anniversaries.

Younger generations learn about how marriages are valued through these celebrations. In her work on communication rituals in intercultural weddings, Leeds-Hurwitz (2002) makes the case that a wedding can be a way for the couple to socialize their support community, as well as remind themselves of their new, unique identity as a couple. The families and support community witness how the couple hopes to blend each partner's background and unite their support community. Rituals related to life-cycle transitions, such as graduations and weddings, serve to introduce new statuses and socialize perceptions of people (Troll, 1988). For instance, graduation rituals may help a child think of herself as an adult and be perceived by others as an adult. Overall, rituals socialize family members by highlighting family values and flagging important events and transitions in life.

Stabilizing and Protective Functions

Routines and rituals help families deal with ordinary daily stressors and transitions. This may explain why some parents and young children alike suffer when their "normal schedule" is disrupted. Jencius and Rotter (1998) found, for example, that bedtime rituals contributed to less sleep disturbance for the child (e.g., less protest against bedtime, trouble going to sleep, or waking up in the middle of the night), so long as the rituals involved the child, emphasized continuity statements, and were conducted with some flexible choice rather than extreme rigidity. Examples of *child involvement* in bedtime rituals included a child turning on his or her own bathwater, or helping to make lunch or pick out clothes for the next day. *Continuity statements* included references to tomorrow that gave faith to the child that there will be a tomorrow with events to expect. Examples of *giving the child choice* within reason involved telling the child that dad can read two long books or three short books or letting the child choose what the bedtime snack or bathtime activities will be. To some families, bedtime patterns are simply routines with little symbolic meaning. To other families, bedtime patterns truly take on ritual status. That is, the bath, teeth brushing, a bedtime story, prayer, or lying down with the child in bed are imbued with symbolic relational messages. Jencius and Rotter argue that for parents who both work during the day, the bedtime ritual is often crucial because they have limited opportunities to symbolize their care and affection.

Continuing throughout the lifespan, when families develop predictable family routines and rituals during middle childhood years, children perform better in school (Fiese, 2000b) and adolescents have a higher self-esteem and sense of belonging (Fiese, 1992). Rituals have the capacity to bring stability and meaning, especially at times when children are vulnerable to other chaotic experiences outside the family. This same reasoning may explain why the dinnertime ritual is so commonly cited as a buffer to adolescent behavior problems and substance use (Eisenberg, 2008; Fulkerson, 2006; Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001). Children are not the only ones to benefit from the protective benefits of rituals. Fiese and Tomcho (2001) found that the more meaning married couples found in their religious holiday rituals, the more relationship satisfaction they experienced. The meaningful holiday rituals were a way to reaffirm their own affection and intimacy.

Rituals even help buffer potential stress and chaos during transitions inside the family. This appears to be the case for blended families, who benefit from balancing new family rituals to embrace their new family while still honoring the old family traditions (Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998). Similarly, couples that transition to parenthood benefit from maintaining some of their old relationship maintenance rituals (e.g., still taking time for a night out without the baby) while they simultaneously develop new rituals with their child (Bruess & Pearson, 1995; Fiese, Hooker, Kotary, & Schwagler, 1993). Further, new rituals developed in association with the birth of a child can provide grandparents with an opportunity to be involved with grandchildren (e.g., to help celebrate a grandchild's birthday) (Fiese et al., 2002).

Therapeutic Functions

There is a growing body of research on the therapeutic role of rituals in the face of family illness and substance abuse. Cheal (1988) theorized that rituals could be mechanisms of tension management. The behavioral routine stabilizes family life in the midst of a crisis that has the capacity to drastically alter family patterns. In addition, the ritual reminds the family of important symbolic meanings or brings new meaning at a time when the family is vulnerable to the loss or misconstrual of meaning.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Wolin and Bennett began to explore the relationship between alcoholism and family rituals. They were concerned with three “critical crossroads” in the relationship between family rituals and alcoholism. The first involved the family of origin’s response to parental alcoholism, particularly the extent to which the alcoholism disrupted family rituals. Here, they were interested in whether rituals would protect a child from the effects of an alcoholic parent or at the other extreme enable the alcoholism to continue. The second and third crossroads involved the spouse selected by the child and the couple’s establishment of rituals in their new family, and relate to the extent to which parental alcoholism would be transmitted to the child. In a series of studies, Wolin and Bennett explored the child’s ritual heritage (i.e., the rituals related to one’s family of origin background) and ritual establishment (i.e., the “crucial” choices children from an alcoholic home make when they select a mate and establish their own rituals).

Bennett, Wolin, Reiss, and Teitelbaum (1987) articulate the link between family rituals and alcoholism in the following way:

As with most chronic illnesses, alcoholism can become a powerful organizer of family life, altering the details of daily routines as well as special occasions. Not all families suffer the consequences of alcoholism in the same way, however. While some are clearly able to protect their daily routines and most valued activities, others are unsuccessful in keeping the ravages due to the alcoholic drinking under control. (p. 112)

Their research spawned interest in the effects of “ritual disruption.” This important concept refers to whether a family’s rituals are subsumed by the alcoholism or kept distinctive from the problem drinking behavior. In *subsumptive families*, the alcohol use disrupts and controls the practice of family rituals. In fact, the alcohol abuse is a negative ritual in itself. Haugland (2005) details the explicit ways that alcoholism disrupts family rituals, and in doing so, she points out the immense pressure on the spouse of the alcoholic to try to compensate for the alcoholic spouse’s failure to uphold family rituals. In her study of paternal alcohol abuse, Haugland found that some mothers went to extreme lengths to at least try to maintain the structural aspects of family rituals (e.g., maintaining family dinners, bedtime), even if the family atmosphere was emotionally loaded with negativity and conflict. The problem is that in trying to keep the family running, the mothers were going at it alone. In some cases, the pressure was so great for the mothers that they were not able to maintain any semblance of the ritual.

In *distinctive families*, the family rituals remain distinct from the alcohol abuse. In Haugland’s (2005) study of alcoholic fathers, she characterized protective families as those where the father was able to participate in family rituals (e.g., dinner time, a child’s birthday party) without becoming overly intoxicated in the presence of the children. In families where rituals, namely the dinnertime rituals, are kept intact and distinctive from the alcoholic problems, children are less likely to develop alcoholic problems of their own (Bennett et al., 1987). In some cases, family rituals may function even better if the alcoholic member is absent or hung-over. Bennett et al.’s research exposed other shielding factors related to spouse selection and selective engagement in nonalcoholic family rituals. Regarding transmission of alcoholism, children who came from alcoholic families received additional protection by choosing spouses and in-laws who promoted rituals that were not dominated by an alcoholic identity.

Upholding positive family rituals has also been proven to be an effective means for managing illness in the family. Markson and Fiese (2000) found evidence that meaningful family rituals protected children from anxiety-related health problems. Similarly, Fiese (2000a, 2007) found that families were most successful at managing a child's asthma when they had established daily routines regarding asthma care. These routines involved giving the child daily doses of medicine at prescribed times (e.g., mealtime), refilling prescriptions, establishing behaviors for dealing with asthma attacks, keeping track of inhalers, vacuuming the house, etc. Managing these routines allowed other social and familial routines and rituals (e.g., school attendance, dinnertime, night time waking, vacations) to be less disrupted.

Problems with Family Rituals

Although they are often positive forms of family interaction, rituals can also be characterized by family dysfunction and stress. Rituals can symbolize dysfunction. Holiday rituals or wedding rituals are intended to be some of the most positive rituals that families ever experience. Instead, they frequently spark some of the most heightened stress families ever experience (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002). Furthermore, rituals that were once imbued with positive meaning can lose their symbolic meaning over time. Unfortunately, many maladaptive rituals are also transmitted across generations. Based on earlier work by Wolin and Bennett, Viere (2001) summarized six typologies of family ritual use. The typology depicts how families vary in their commitment to ritualizing and their ability to adapt rituals to time and new circumstances. This typology also helps understand how and why rituals may have a positive or negative effect on the family.

- (1) **Underritualized:** Families who do not celebrate or mark family changes and who do not join in larger societal rituals.
- (2) **Rigidly Ritualized:** Families who cannot adapt their rituals over time. Ritual behaviors are closed, prescribed, and must occur in the same way every time.
- (3) **Skewed Ritualization:** One particular ethnic or religious tradition or one side of the family is ritualized at the expense of the other. Or one particular behavior is ritualized excessively, often with a negative intent or impact.
- (4) **Hollow Ritualization:** The family celebrates events out of obligation, and there is little meaning or process in the event. This often occurs when rituals are not adapted over time and create stress for family members.
- (5) **Interrupted Ritualization:** Sudden changes (e.g., death, illness, war) keep the family from celebrating the rituals they would otherwise celebrate.
- (6) **Adaptable Ritualization:** The family keeps the rituals meaningful by flexibly changing the events, roles, and rules related to the ritual when necessary.

Baxter and Clark (1996) studied a family's commitment to rituals and hypothesized that their ability to adapt rituals would be related to both the degree of support and control in family communication patterns. Their results indicated that families who were more committed to their rituals expressed more supportive communication (as measured by having a conversation-orientation). We should note that they only studied rituals that were intended to be positive. Clearly, some families are committed to rituals that are negative and are not able to adapt their commitment to the old ritual so as to be compatible with the family's current needs. Leon and Jacobvitz (2003) found that mothers who had an insecure attachment to their parents in their family of origin enacted more rigid ritualization in their families of orientation. They also speculated that conducting rituals in a rigid way may give insecure mothers a feeling of control or security. Not surprisingly, Fiese (1992) found that mother-adolescent disagreement about commitment to family rituals (e.g., mom thinks the dinnertime ritual is more important and

meaningful than her teenager does) was negatively related to adolescent feelings of belonging. Adolescent children commonly get embarrassed when their parents fail to adapt childhood rituals. Essentially, the adolescent outgrows the ritual faster than the parents do. For example, “practices evident in celebrating a young child’s birthday (e.g., funny hats, games, candy) may not be responsive to the kind of birthday party the child wants during his or her adolescence” (Baxter & Clark, 1996, p. 256).

Van der Hart (1983) pointed out that families with little meaning and commitment in their rituals are in danger of hollow rituals. These families often show a high degree of role prescription. Imagine the scenario of a hollow ritual. Members are being forced to go to grandma’s house for lunch every Sunday; the same food is served each week; no one really wants to be present and little meaning is attached to the event. Rigid role prescriptions can also skew the practice of rituals. For example, imagine a mother who takes on all the duties associated with cooking the Thanksgiving meal and thinks of the holiday as work, while the rest of the family gets to enjoy themselves (Shaw, 1992). Or as Galvin and Brommel (1999) describe, a spouse may engage in a skewed work ritual, where he or she works an obnoxious amount of hours in order to gain distance from the family or avoid problems. Roberts (1988) even proposed that rigidly ritualized symptoms such as binge eating, alcoholic drinking, spousal abuse, and drug abuse often appear in families lacking more meaningful positive rituals. We attempt to shed more light on negative rituals such as these in Part IV of the book.

Finally, inclusion in family rituals defines who is an insider and who is an outsider. Family rituals construct boundaries that may partially or totally exclude family members whose position in the family is ambiguous, controversial, or whose identity and beliefs are not compatible with the rest of the members (Oswald, 2002). In some families, the family status and inclusion of gay and lesbian persons is disputed. Oswald (2002) found that the quality of family relationships, namely parent–child and sibling relationships, and the visibility of the same-sex relationship predicted whether gay/lesbian persons and their partners were invited to family rituals. In earlier research, Oswald (2000) contends that certain types of family rituals, namely heterosexual weddings, are commonly problematic for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender family members. The problem may stem from the implicit messages sent by the family’s selective ritualization.

FAMILY STORIES AND SECRETS

Family Stories

Families naturally tell stories during the course of interaction. It is common to hear family members say to one another, “Do you remember when . . .” or “One time we all . . .” (Fiese et al., 1999; Fiese, Hooker, Kotary, Schwagler, & Rimmer, 1995). In recent decades, family scholars have recognized that these stories, whether they occur naturally or are prompted by a researcher’s questions, provide a window to the symbolic content of family life. Family stories are defined as “verbal accounts of personal experiences that are important to the family, and typically involve the creation and maintenance of relationships, depict rules of interaction, and reflect beliefs about family and other social institutions” (Fiese et al., 2001, p. 260). We would be remiss not to acknowledge that family stories can also be about negative family interactions and can involve the destruction of relationships (Vangelisti, Crumley, & Baker, 1999). Whether positive or negative, stories serve several important functions in the family, all related to the process of symbolic meaning-making. Some of the primary functions of family stories are to: remember events, interpret and judge events, socialize members, affirm belonging, and connect generations (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004). Family stories are often prompted by certain situations (e.g., births, funerals, holidays, vacations) and center around common topics

(e.g., how a couple got together, how a family originated whether by birth or adoption, how the family handles adversity, what it means to be a member the family, or how parents struggled with issues of growing up or making decisions).

Functions of Family Stories: Referential

One primary function of stories is to help families remember events by marking information and experiences in time. This is what Vangelisti et al. (1999) term the *referential function* of stories. Family stories form a “family scrapbook” over the generations (Fiese et al., 1999, p. 3). Even though a primary function of stories is to remember events, Karney and Coombs (2000) note that people are not reliable historians. The scrapbook gets adapted over time by inconsistent memories, exaggerations, and denials. One may wonder if the bad memories of family members pose a problem for researchers. To the contrary, if family members had accurate, unbiased memories, researchers would probably be far less interested in their stories. The fact that family members are telling stories that they *choose* to tell versus ones that are historically accurate gives the researcher an insider’s perspective as to what events and experiences are most symbolic and in what way. For example, a collection of studies in which married couples retrospectively tell the events of their relationship development indicate that how a couple remembers the events of their past is related to their current satisfaction and future marital outcomes (Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz, 1992; Flora & Segrin, 2003). In basic terms, dissatisfied couples seem to forget the once pleasant events in their relationship development. Satisfied couples cling to the pleasant memories of the past and possibly even exaggerate their positive nature. Imagine, for example, that now when a husband tells the story about their first date, the story gets revised and perhaps exaggerated to reflect declining satisfaction, such that now the food at the restaurant was not really that good and how he remembers that his date arrived late. Other research shows that married couples do well to forget some of their partners’ faults and instead dwell on their partners’ strengths in the process of storytelling (Karney & Coombs, 2000). In this way, the ongoing revision of relationship stories becomes transformative and redefines reality in a positive or negative light (Berger & Kellner, 1964; Wamboldt, 1999).

Functions of Family Stories: Sensemaking and Evaluation

People tell stories to make sense of events, especially events that are unusual or difficult. When grieving the loss of a loved one, sharing the story helps people cope with the event because the act of storytelling helps them gain control over emotions, understand the event, draw conclusions about the event’s significance, and have others understand their own experience of the event (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005). Just as individuals tell stories to make sense of difficult events, families engage in *joint storytelling* for the same reason. Kellas and Trees (2006) found joint family storytelling about difficult family events to be a complex process. Sometimes family members actively collaborate in storytelling and even come to a shared conclusion about the difficult event. Collaborating to jointly tell stories has been linked to more satisfying family relationships than storytelling with less collaboration (Trees & Koenig, 2003). However some family stories are told in such a way that each individual asserts his or her version and conclusions about the difficult event. This too is informative. Finally, Kellas and Trees describe incomplete sense-making, where one or some of the family members are disengaged from the storytelling, lacking shared meaning about the event or a shared desire or ability to be involved.

As people make sense of events, their interpretive assessments of experiences are revealed. Vangelisti et al. (1999) terms this the *evaluative function* of stories. By examining stories, researchers can assess people’s perceptions and attitudes and see how they alter the construction of meaning in their relationships (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997;

Buehlman et al., 1992; Vangelisti et al., 1999). Vangelisti et al. (1999) summarize the symbolic impact of family stories:

When people tell stories about their family, they provide listeners with clues as to how they feel about family members and what they think makes for ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’ family interaction. The issues they choose to discuss or avoid, the attributions they make about family members’ behavior, and the way they position themselves vis-à-vis the story line can reveal interesting information about how they view family relationships. (p. 336)

Evaluations of family events are also related to people’s expectations for ideal family interaction, as Vangelisti et al. (1999) illustrated in a two-part study. Participants were asked to write a story telling about an event that they felt best described their family. After explaining why they thought the story happened the way it did, participants were asked to “re-write the story so it described what they believed was an ‘ideal’ family, unless they already considered their family to be ideal” (p. 340). In the first part of the study, Vangelisti et al. found that stories reflecting themes of care, togetherness, adaptability, reconstruction (e.g., the family being reunited or reconciled), and humor were positively associated with family satisfaction. Stories with themes of disregard, hostility, chaos, divergent values, and negative personality attributes were negatively related to family satisfaction. Thus, the stories revealed what it was that made people satisfied or dissatisfied with their family relationships. When evaluating positive events, discrepant themes between one’s own family stories and the ideal family stories were related to family satisfaction. For example, the more people felt that the positive themes for their own family stories exceeded their ideal family regarding these themes, the more satisfied they were with their own families. In turn, people had less family satisfaction when their own family stories had more negative themes than their ideal family stories. The evaluative function of stories is strongly linked to people’s expectations for what makes a good family. More recently, Vangelisti and Alexander (2002) suggest that when spouses’ ideal standards for a spouse are unmet, one of their last remaining coping mechanisms is to construct a story that rationalizes the disappointing situation through excuses, justifications, and other similar means.

Functions of Family Stories: Identity, Socialization, and Belonging

Family identities are socially constructed through storytelling. Kellas (2005) found that some families identify as “storytelling families,” are proud of that characteristic, and for good reason. Families that identify as storytelling ones have higher overall family functioning, and Kellas suspects this may be because storytelling is a tool for families to shape their identity and family climate by reminding themselves of their strengths and closeness. Indeed, families who were better at framing family events in a positive light in their stories had better family functioning (Kellas, 2005). Storytelling families also retell stories over and over, as knowing the story marks group membership and builds identity. Leeds-Hurwitz (2005) examined how family stories are retold at family events, noting the phenomenon of anticipatory laughter. When family members know the story already, they know to laugh before the joke is fully told. Anticipatory laughter shows familiarity with the family identity. Sometimes stories are retold for the benefit of younger family members, to socialize them into the family. But often stories are retold simply so that members, who already know the story, can remind themselves of the spirit and history. Birth stories are often retold many times, with such stories following a classic theme that makes one’s family identity evident.

Another major function of stories is to *socialize members of the family*. One of the most obvious examples is a parent telling a story or recounting a childhood experience as a way to share values, manners, and lessons. Stories have morals to them, and family members often use such stories strategically (Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Bochner, 1995). For example,

Fiese et al. (1995) found that once children were of preschool age, parents began to tell stories that included themes of achievement and personal success. Theoretically, this storytelling is a way to socialize children into roles the parent hopes the children will enact later in life. Once the children are at an age where they can engage in symbolic role-taking (i.e., imagining other situations and roles), these stories can have an impact, because the children can imagine how they could conduct their life and make choices in order to replicate the themes of the story.

Prior to preschool age, Fiese et al. (1995) found that parents told stories with more themes of affiliation, belonging, or closeness versus themes of achievement and personal success. In Fiese et al.'s study, the parents of very young children were utilizing the *belonging function* of storytelling. Birth stories are a perfect example of stories that affirm the child's connection to the parent and build the child's collective identity. Fiese et al. (1995) even noted, "we were struck by the relatively high incidence of storytelling in families with infants," which they note is likely useful for linguistic development and stimulation, even if the infant could not understand the story (p. 768). Another appealing explanation is that parents benefit from telling belonging stories to infants because the parents are also beginning to solidify their own new bond with the child. The same effect happens in adoption stories that parents tell to children. Studying the adoption stories that parents tell to their internationally adopted children, Harrigan (2010) discovered that through storytelling parents and children alike become familiar with how to talk about adoption. This helps solidify their bond and share that bond publicly. Perhaps more obvious, the adoption stories told by the parents in Harrigan's research helped children understand their complete history and reinforced the sense of belonging to their adoptive parents. Indeed, the meaning of what family is and who belongs to a family is constituted through stories (Harold, 2000).

Fiese et al. (1995) also note that themes of family stories are clearly culture bound. For example, families who adhere to values of extreme individualism may see less need to constantly tell stories that highlight themes of connection, belonging, and interdependence, especially as children get older. Other families may constantly emphasize such themes throughout the family, regardless of family stage.

Analyzing Family Narratives

Cowan (1999) makes a fine distinction between narratives and stories. Narratives refer to the form, and stories to the thematic content. Prior to the 1990s, scholars examined stories for their thematic content, and certainly much can be ascertained from such an examination as we have just presented. However, in the 1990s, a group of researchers formed the Family Narrative Consortium (FNC) in order to systematically develop a research methodology to study narrative form. Specifically, they were interested in how family narrative form relates to family interaction patterns, marital satisfaction, and child adjustment (see Fiese et al., 1999; Fiese et al., 2001). Jorgenson and Bochner (2004) point out that there has been some resistance to analyzing the narrative form of stories, because occasionally the emotion and meaning of the story is lost in the effort to predict outcomes and analyze a story with predetermined categories. Further, stories should not be detached from the experiences in which they were formed; stories are a part of family relationships (Bochner & Ellis, 1995).

Nonetheless, the FNC identified three components they felt were central to the study of family narratives as a form of interaction: narrative coherence, narrative interaction, and relationship beliefs. The FNC developed several scales to measure each of the three components of narratives. Members of the FNC also collaborated on a series of studies intended to validate the scales, which we describe here.

Narrative coherence refers to how an individual constructs and organizes a narrative. Coherence is often called the "syntax" of a narrative (Fiese et al., 2001). It also involves the consistency of the narrative and the match between the story's affect and content. Dickstein,

St. Andre, Sameroff, Seifer, and Schiller (1999) hypothesized that a family's ability to produce a coherent narrative regarding family life would be related to the presence of maternal mental illness. Indeed, they found that "mothers with major depression and currently experiencing psychiatric symptoms created less coherent accounts than nonill mothers" (Fiese et al., 2001, p. 268). Mothers with psychiatric symptoms also told stories with more negative narrative interaction—a component we discuss in a moment. In another test of the validity of the narrative coherence scales, Grotevant, Fravel, Gorall, and Piper (1999) found that parents who went through an open adoption processes had more coherent narratives related to the child's heritage than those who made confidential or mediated adoptions. Confidential adoptions had more incomplete details that affected the narrative's coherence. Assuming that coherent birth stories are related to psychological well-being, the authors suggested that this finding might have important implications for adoption programs or therapies that help prospective parents develop a "story" of the child's heritage.

The second component, *narrative interaction*, refers to the way two or more members construct and tell the story together. It involves studying the "act" of storytelling. The FNC developed scales to measure couple narrative style (i.e., how the couple tells a story together). On the narrative style scale, negative referents include discrepancies, differences of opinion, parallel stories, and occasions of anger, while positive referents include additions to the partner's story and synthetic interaction. A related scale measures coordination of the couple or family members (e.g., positive coordination in the form of "we" statements, asking for others' opinions and clarification, polite turn taking versus negative referents such as statements of disconfirming exclusion). Finally, a confirmation/disconfirmation scale distinguishes generally validating behaviors and statements from nonvalidating ones. Using a semistructured interview, Wamboldt (1999) asked couples to tell stories primarily about their current relationship and some about their family of origin. They found that couple's relational satisfaction was related to positive, joint narrative interaction. In other words, it appears to be important that the couple jointly constructs their relationship reality in a positive, affirming way as reflected by the scales. Other researchers have confirmed the benefits of joint, interactive, affirming storytelling for couples (Buehlman et al., 1992; Flora & Segrin, 2003) and families (Kellas, 2005; Trees & Koenig, 2003). Specifically, Fiese and Marjinsky (1999) interviewed families about their mealtime practices and had the couple tell a story to their child about a mealtime when the parent was a child. They found that "couples who worked together to tell their story also worked together with their children in positive exchanges at the dinner table" (Fiese & Marjinsky, 1999, p. 65). They explained their findings by noting that "good couple behavior is related to good family behavior" (Fiese & Marjinsky, 1999, p. 65).

The third component the FNC identified in narratives is *relationship beliefs*. One scale measuring this component, the relationship expectations scale, examines how members of the family view relationships (e.g., manageable, reliable, safe versus dangerous, unfulfilling, and restrictive). Another scale related to the relationship beliefs component measures the extent to which the family is willing to share personal and sensitive information with an interviewer. Studying the impact of relationship beliefs, Fiese and Marjinsky (1999) found that secure relationship beliefs expressed about the current family were related to positivity at the dinner table.

Family Secrets

Stories can both reveal and hide information. Baxter and Wilmot (1985) suggest that the best way to really understand a social organization, such as the family, is to analyze the strategies used by the unit to control the flow of information. One such strategy is the family secret. Vangelisti (1994a) found that almost all families have secrets. As we mentioned earlier, people are unreliable historians, sometimes unintentionally, because they simply cannot remember the facts, and other times intentionally, because they want to keep something a secret.

Theoretical Grounding: Communication Privacy Management Theory

Caughlin and Petronio (2004) view secrets as a special instance of privacy in which information is intentionally revealed. Sandra Petronio (1991, 2000, 2002) introduced *Communication Privacy Management Theory* (CPM), which details how people manage privacy, and specifically applied the theory to family groups (Caughlin & Petronio, 2004; Petronio & Caughlin, 2006; Petronio, Jones, & Morr, 2003). Petronio (2002) argues that people feel they have ownership over their private information and a right to control the flow of such information to others. CPM uses the metaphor of boundaries to refer to the mental limits people set regarding information they own and information others own. People have both personal and collective boundaries (Karpel, 1980; Petronio et al., 2003; Vangelisti, Caughlin, & Timmerman, 2001). Personal boundaries are set by individuals to control information they feel they own, and lead to *individual secrets*. *Whole or shared family secrets* are those that the entire family keeps from outsiders, and such secrets represent the use of collectively negotiated boundaries (Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997). Sometimes coalitions of family members may keep an *internal* secret from the rest of the family (Brown-Smith, 1998). This type of internal secret is illustrated in Berger and Paul's (2008) research on parents who keep their use of donor assistance to conceive a secret from their children.

How do family members decide what to keep a secret, what to tell, and whom to tell? CPM proposes that most families have rules regarding the regulation of private information (Petronio, 2002; Petronio et al., 2003). Sometimes rules are pre-existing, and members become socialized to them implicitly or explicitly. For example, some families by rule do not talk about money in public. This rule may be communicated explicitly by saying, "We don't talk about money in public," or implicitly by predictably changing the topic if it comes up. On other occasions, families, or coalitions in families, mutually negotiate rules, although this effort is often the subject of great conflict. Indeed, Berger and Paul (2008) found that family functioning was positively associated with parents who agreed to jointly disclose to their children their use of donor assistance to conceive. Agreeing on rules for disclosing and then jointly doing so may have been an indicator of the parents' ability to work together and trust each other. Still in other situations, individuals find themselves in a "predicament where no clear privacy rules used in the family can easily apply" (Petronio et al., 2003, p. 33). CPM suggests five criteria that shape the formation of family rules (Petronio, 2002; Petronio et al., 2003). Rules are affected by (1) cultural expectations, (2) gender expectations, (3) individual motivations, (4) judgments about the benefit to risk ratio, and (5) the context.

Decisions about how to manage private or secretive information result in what CPM terms family privacy dilemmas. *Internal* family privacy dilemmas stem from boundaries that develop within the family (Petronio et al., 2003). Individuals have boundaries regarding what they feel comfortable telling other family members. The dilemma stems from balancing how to be an individual, but also an individual in a group. Other internal privacy dilemmas develop when certain family members unite as confidants and keep information from the rest of the family.

Vangelisti et al. (2001) examined privacy dilemmas regarding boundaries between the family and people *external* to the family. Specifically, they studied individuals' criteria for revealing whole family secrets to an outsider. Their study produced 10 common criteria people use when deciding whether to disclose a whole family secret. The 10 most common criteria are as follows.

- (1) Intimate Exchange (e.g., If we were having a heart to heart discussion)
- (2) Exposure (e.g., If I were confronted or it would be found out anyway)
- (3) Urgency (e.g., If I could not hold it in any longer or he/she were the only person I could tell)
- (4) Acceptance (e.g., If the person would still accept me)

- (5) Conversational Appropriateness (e.g., If we were discussing a topic related to it)
- (6) Relational Security (e.g., If I trusted that the person would not tell anyone else)
- (7) Important Reason (e.g., If I thought it was essential that the person know)
- (8) Permission (e.g., If my family members thought it was okay to tell)
- (9) Family Membership (e.g., If he/she was going to marry into my family)
- (10) Never (e.g., I would never tell)

The *relational security* and *important reason* criteria yielded interesting results. *Relational security* appeared to stand as a “minimum criterion” for revealing family secrets. That is, if the right amount of relational security was not present in the first place, then the individual would not even consider telling, and subsequently the other criteria would hardly matter. However, for the *important reason* criterion, people reported that if there was a pressing reason to tell, they would consider doing so even if they were otherwise unlikely to tell. So this criterion superseded others. People who strongly identified with their secret, felt their family secret was intimate, or perceived the secret to be negatively-toned were more likely to require that more of the criteria be fulfilled before they would tell another.

Types and Topics of Family Secrets

Secrets vary by topic and type. In 1994, Vangelisti developed three categories of secrets: taboo secrets, rule violations, and conventional secrets. *Taboo secrets* concern topics that are condemned or stigmatized by the family and/or society. Topics pertaining to abuse, sexuality, unwanted or premarital pregnancies, mental health, substance abuse, or marital problems are often considered taboo secrets. Secrets involving *rule violations* center around family rules that have been broken (e.g., breaking curfew). *Conventional secrets* pertain to activities or topics that are not necessarily wrong but family members feel are inappropriate to discuss, particularly with nonintimates (e.g., personality conflicts, religion/ideology, how much money one makes). This category could also include secrets that are perceived to be positive (e.g., birthday surprises).

Risks Assessment for Family Secrets and Topic Avoidance

As this examination of family secrets continues, it is important to note that research on secrets has been expanded to a similar domain of *topic avoidance*. Secrets involve specific and consequential information that another does not know, whereas topic avoidance is a more general approach to communication. Research on family secrets and topic avoidance has largely revolved around the analysis of risks and benefits in revealing information. Common questions in these analyses ask how the keeping or revealing of information relates to relationship protection, self protection, other protection, or a lack of closeness in the relationship. The careful approach that communication scholars have taken with this topic reveals that the view of secrets as entirely negative is narrow and inaccurate (Bochner, 1982; Caughlin & Afifi, 2004; Caughlin & Petronio, 2004).

With regard to *relationship protection* and *other protection*, Caughlin and Afifi (2004) found that in both parent–child and romantic relationships the negative association between one’s own topic avoidance and one’s satisfaction was moderated by perceptions that the topic avoidance was motivated by reasons of relationship protection (e.g., keeping a secret to overlook a family member’s faults, to prevent greater family distress, or to maintain a positive surprise). Roloff and Ifert (2000) describe how intimate partners withhold complaints, suppress arguments, and declare some topics off limits all in an effort to manage conflict and protect the relationship. Sometimes individuals feel that talking about a certain topic is futile or even uninteresting (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000). For it to benefit intimate relationships, topic avoidance must be conducted selectively not universally, freely chosen not

coerced, and requires good communication skills and an attitude of tolerance (Roloff & Ifert, 2000).

The risk is that when people perceive that their partner avoided topics due to a *lack of closeness*, the inverse association between topic avoidance and satisfaction is amplified (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004). Guerrero (2000) points out that some people even strategically use topic avoidance to destroy or deescalate a relationship because they know that pervasive secret keeping is antithetical to relationship development. Alternatively, people also use secrets in ways that build closeness in relationships. Shared secrets can create a bond between the members who are “in the know” (Vangelisti, 1994a). It is often flattering and affirming to be the recipient of confidential information (Petronio et al., 2003).

In addition to keeping and telling secrets to protect relationships, to protect others, or because of a lack of closeness, some people are motivated by a desire for *self protection* from negative fallout, in the form of conflict or disapproval (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000; Caughlin & Afifi, 2004). Derlega, Winstead, and Folk-Barron (2000) echo this concern in the context of persons living with HIV/AIDS. On one hand, disclosing the diagnosis is necessary for garnering social support from one’s intimate partner or family, and there is evidence that keeping something in, especially suppressing negative emotion, takes a toll on one’s mental and physical health (Caughlin & Petronio, 2004; Petrie, Booth & Pennebaker, 1998). On the other hand, one must weigh the benefits against the potential negative fallout.

Due to a similar desire for self-protection, adolescents and young adults frequently avoid discussing relationship experiences, dangerous behaviors, and especially sexual experiences with their parents (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a). Adolescents and young adults are more likely to discuss such topics with siblings rather than parents, and they usually choose a person of the same sex when disclosing sexual matters (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995b). Contrary to popular belief, adolescent daughters exhibit similar levels of topic avoidance with parents as adolescent sons do, except that daughters are a little more likely to talk about their friendships with their parents (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a). Certain types of family environments also promote pressure to conceal secrets—part of a larger phenomenon known as the *chilling effect*, where communication is stifled for fear of a negative repercussion. Afifi and Olson (2005) found that the coercive power in families with a high conformity orientation and low conversation orientation motivated members to conceal information. The thinking is that concealing sensitive information helps avoid conflict and the “harsh rebukes” that may result (Afifi & Olson, 2005, p. 211).

Topic avoidance remains relatively common through the time the child launches from home or moves away to college. This change in network patterns is typical and age-appropriate (Caughlin & Golish, 2002). Individualistic cultural norms set the expectation for teenagers to mature so as to one day become independent of their parents. Topic avoidance represents the teen’s desire to figure things out alone, take ownership over information, and set new boundaries in the relationship. Admittedly, many parents and children struggle as they attempt to negotiate new network boundaries and channels (Petronio, 1994). When parents bring up topics that adolescents would prefer not to discuss and when they press for discussion, few adolescents proceed with a direct conversation about the topic. By far, the most common responses by adolescents are ones of deception, direct and indirect rejection, and aggression (Mazur & Ebesu-Hubbard, 2004). As one might expect, parents’ dissatisfaction with the parent–child relationship is related to perceptions of their child’s avoidance (Caughlin & Golish, 2002).

Sometimes the topics that adolescents want to protect themselves from are not ones having to do with themselves, but rather topics associated with their parents and the state of their family. Afifi, Afifi, Morse, and Hamrick (2008) found that adolescents from divorced families reported feeling caught between parents. Further, they experienced feelings of anxiety about how to protect themselves, their parents, and the parent–adolescent relationship. This anxiety led them to report that they would set up a topic boundary by avoiding talking about their

parents' relationship (though observational coding did not reveal that they actually avoided the topic). In another study, the more uncertainty children in post-divorce families had about the changes in their family (e.g., the role of a new stepparent, renegotiated parental authority, rules, and discipline) the more they avoided talking about the changes (Affi & Schrodt, 2003). Talking about the changes may have been more risky than coping through avoidance. In intact families, children avoided talking about moderate levels of family change, but when the change became greater, they engaged.

Expanded Theoretical Grounding: Revelation Risk Model

Affi and Steuber (2009) articulated their Revelation Risk Model (RRM; Figure 3.2), which efficiently synthesizes research on secrets and topic avoidance, and expands on ideas in Communication Privacy Management theory (see also Affi, Olson, & Armstrong, 2005).

The RRM begins with the premise that when people decide whether to tell a secret, they assess the level of risk to themselves, others, and their relationship(s). The level of risk is affected by the valence, positive or negative, associated with the secret, as well as the closeness of relationship one feels with the target. The level of risk one feels then influences two other processes: (1) one's willingness to reveal the secret in certain conditions, and (2) communication efficacy. More specifically, people balance the risks with conditions such as the desire for catharsis, the target's need to know, or pressure from the target or others to know. People also weigh the risks in light of communication efficacy, or the confidence they have in their ability to actually talk about the secret. When risk is high, people may worry that there may not be a way to talk about the topic so as to elicit a positive outcome. Together, negativity of the secret predicts the level of risk; the level of risk affects attitudes about communication efficacy and one's willingness to consider disclosing, which in turn influences the ultimate decision to reveal or conceal the secret.

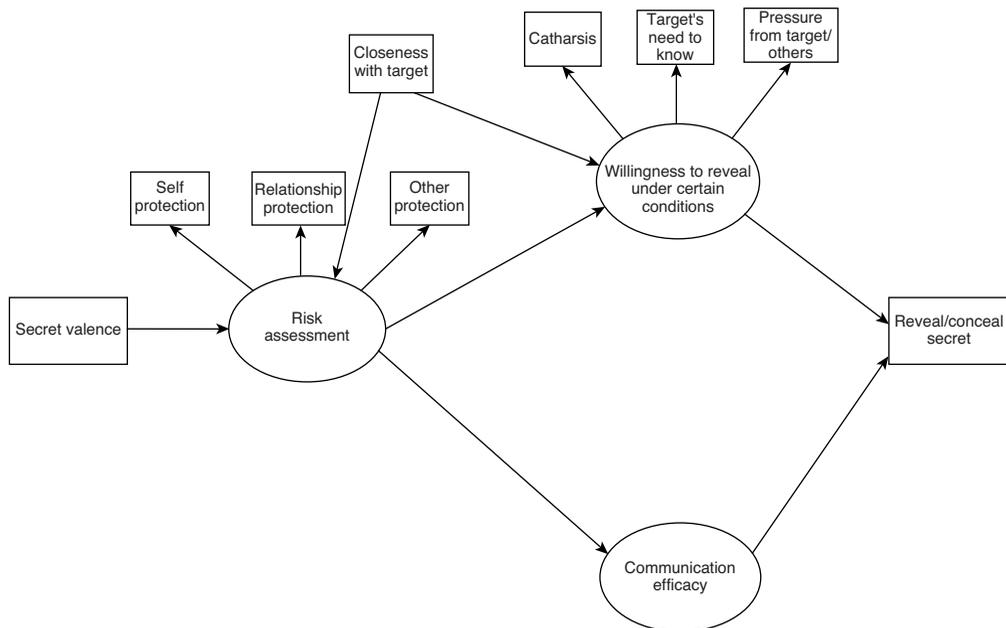


Figure 3.2 Revelation risk model

Note. From Affi, T. & Steuber, K. (2009). The revelation risk model (RRM): Factors that predict the revelation of secrets and strategies used to reveal them. *Communication Monographs*, 76(2), 144–176. Reprinted with permission.

Subsequent research on the RRM has led to the development of a Strategies for Revealing Secrets scale (Afifi & Steuber, 2009). The scale highlights the emergence of distinct strategies such as (1) preparation and rehearsal, (2) directness, (3) third party revelations, (4) incremental disclosures, (5) entrapment, and (6) indirect mediums (i.e., telephone, mail, e-mail) (Afifi & Steuber, 2009, p. 171). Initial results using the scale show that, realistically, people use multiple strategies to reveal secrets, in what can be a complex and drawn out process.

CONCLUSION

Family members obviously spend a great deal of time together compared to some other types of relationships. Still the quantity of time spent together does not always translate to high quality interactions and positive exchanges. After spending so much time interacting, family members develop a regular communication climate. As Ritchie and Fitzpatrick explain, communication environments stem, in part, from the family's expectations regarding conformity and conversation orientations. Families also develop interaction networks regarding who talks to whom, with what frequency, and about what topics. Family members evaluate their communication by comparing their actual interaction climates to the standards they hold regarding how they wish their family would interact.

Sometimes the communication of family members takes on heightened symbolic meaning in the form of family rituals, stories, and secrets. With regard to rituals, the actual interaction or activity becomes less important than what it symbolizes. Some family rituals act as positive stabilizing and therapeutic forces in the face of family stress. Others are the source of family stress. As for family stories, they are often told with an implicit or explicit function in mind—to help the family remember important events, to socialize members, to pass judgment on behavior, or to emphasize family ties. Family stories and interaction undoubtedly contain omissions. Certain events and experiences are kept as secrets, sometimes by the whole family and sometimes just by certain members. Communication Privacy Management Theory and the Revelation Risk Model explain how people set mental boundaries regarding whether information should be revealed, under what conditions, and how. These boundaries are guided by implicit and explicit rules that individuals and families have regarding the flow of information. Together, the family's communication climate and symbolic interactions reveal the family's unique identity and affect how it relates to the outside world.

4 Family Interaction Processes

Power, Decision Making, and Conflict

This chapter examines three potent family processes: (1) establishing and exerting power, (2) making decisions, and (3) dealing with conflicts. If not overt processes, power, decision making, and conflict show up in underlying ways, sometimes too subtle to be recognized even by family members themselves. An important point of this chapter is that power, decision making, and conflict are ongoing communication *processes*, even though lay people often speak of them as discrete events (e.g., they say “We made a decision” or “We had a conflict”). A process perspective focuses attention on what “has happened, is happening, and may happen” in the family (Sprey, 1999, p. 668). For example, what causes a family conflict to develop as it does? Is there a chain of events that predicts conflict intensity and kind? What direction will the conflict take in the future?

Because power, decision making, and conflict are such fundamental communication processes, a primary goal of this chapter is to introduce and conceptualize each process. With this foundation, we will continue, in subsequent chapters, to examine research regarding the way these family processes assert themselves in specific family contexts (e.g., in parent–child, marital, sibling, step family, and extended family relationships) as well as in the whole family system. Even though we isolate each of these three family processes into separate sections for the sake of discussion, processes of power, decision making, and conflict are interrelated in real-life family interactions. For example, family decisions are inextricably related to who holds the power as well as issues of family conflict.

POWER IN FAMILIES

The models of family functioning presented in chapter 1 recognize that power processes are central to family interaction. The adaptability dimension in Olson’s Circumplex Model addresses power processes manifested in assertiveness, control, discipline, roles, and the enforcement of rules. Issues of power are also inherent in the McMaster model’s dimensions of behavior control and problem solving. Both of these models refer to how power is manifested, but they do not define power or explicitly describe how power develops in families. Thus, the goal of the upcoming sections is to define power and explain the source of power in families. Then we look at how power is manifested in family roles and rules, and connected to family processes like decision making and conflict.

Defining Power

Power, in families, is commonly viewed as an ability or potential to change the behavior of another family member (Cromwell & Olson, 1975; Dunbar, 2004; Levine & Boster, 2001; McDonald, 1980). Power is a process that occurs within interaction. In order to be powerful,

one must have another who is potentially willing to submit or willing to accept influence (Gottman, Coan, Carrère, & Swanson, 1998). According to power-dependency theory, “person A’s power over B is determined by B’s dependence upon A. Likewise, B’s power over A is a function of A’s dependence upon B” (Levine & Boster, 2001, p. 30). In other words, parents hold power over their young children because their children depend on them for basic necessities. As they grow older and depend less on parents, young adult children are usually less willing to accept the influence of their parents.

Safilios-Rothschild (1976) elaborates on two different abilities related to the power to change behavior: the ability to orchestrate and the ability to implement. Individuals with *orchestration abilities* “make only the important and infrequent decisions that do not infringe upon their time, but that determine the family life style and the major characteristics and features of their family” (Safilios-Rothschild, 1976, p. 359). People with orchestration abilities can delegate smaller decisions to other family members as well as the implementation of larger decisions. *Implementation abilities* refer to the power one has to implement decisions, but this power is dependent on the orchestrator. More recently power has been viewed as the ability to change not only behavior, but also emotion/affect. For example, laboratory studies of power in marital interaction show how one partner’s affect influences the other partner’s subsequent affect (Gottman, Driver, Yoshimoto, & Rushe, 2002).

Viewing power as a potential or ability is different from viewing power as an outcome. Power is an ability that people do not always exercise, just like other abilities that people sometimes choose not to exercise (e.g., an artist might have the ability to paint, but choose not to do it). A person in a prestigious position may choose not to exercise his or her power for special privileges. Further, Dunbar writes that “when exercised, [power] is not always successful and, even when successful, its magnitude may not be fully evident” (2004, p. 236). Referring to outcomes that are not realized until later or power abilities that are not evident overtly, researchers have coined the term latent power (Tichenor, 1999).

Sources of Power in Families: Resources and Social Exchange

Sprey (1999) equates studying family communication processes like power to the study of other natural processes; When researchers study the course of a tornado or the flow of a river, “it makes sense to study its beginning to speculate about its duration and future path” (Sprey, 1999, p. 668). Following Sprey’s analogy, it is important to step back and study the source of power among family members.

Bases of Power

French and Raven (1959) describe the following sources or bases of power: reward, coercive, legitimate, expert, and referent power. French and Raven did not specifically apply their research on bases of power to family relationships, but because they assume that power is interactional, their research is informative for family interactions. The assumption that power is interactional suggests that one person does not inherently hold power, but individuals, in this case other family members, grant power to others.

Reward power relies upon a person’s (source’s) ability to reward another (target), and the target’s perception of that ability and reward. In other words, the rewards only become a source of power if the target wants the rewards the source has to offer. Imagine, for example, a parent who says to a college-age son, “I’ll pay for your college education only if you major in engineering.” If the son does not care much about a free college education in light of the expectations, then the money is not a source of power or influence. Bettinghaus and Cody (1994) argue that the influence sparked by reward power will bring about changes in public behavior, but not necessarily changes in private beliefs. For example, the son mentioned above may go on to major in engineering in order to get a free education, but privately not believe

that engineering is the best major for him. Grolnick and Gurland (2002) add that parents can use rewards, token economies, or contingency programs to get their child's compliance, but they cannot expect these tactics to boost the child's self-regulation: "If parents want their daughter to clean her room right now, they should promise her a candy bar, but if they want their daughter to recognize the value of keeping her room clean and to do so willingly without being reminded, the candy bar will not work" (p. 24).

Coercive power stems from expectations on the part of the target that the source will administer punishments if he/she (target) does not conform to the influence attempt. This of course requires that the source has the ability and awareness to administer punishment to bring about change. Adults are not the only ones who have this ability and awareness. In some cases, young children are keenly aware that they can administer punishments to their parents to bring about change. Imagine a child who knows that throwing a temper tantrum in the grocery store will cause mom to give in and buy the candy that he/she wants. The strength of coercive power lies in the magnitude of the negativity associated with the threatened punishment. For many parents, a public temper tantrum is embarrassing, and that embarrassment is a form of social punishment. It is no wonder that some parents comply with their children, buy the candy, and effectively rid themselves of the public embarrassment. Other parents are not embarrassed or remain cool during the temper tantrums, and their children learn that such behavior is not a strong source of coercive power. As in the case of reward power, compliance due to coercive power is likely to change public behavior more than private beliefs (Bettinghaus & Cody, 1994). For example, the parent may buy the candy, but privately not believe it is the best thing to do for the child.

Legitimate power addresses power based on the positions one holds or roles one plays. When a mother argues that the reason her child should comply with her is because, "I'm your mother, and I said so," she is assuming that her position grants her the "right" to make a request. The target feels obligated to comply to the extent that he/she has some internalized respect for the legitimacy of the source's position (e.g., the child believes it is important to respect parents). Because of this internalized respect for the source's position, Bettinghaus and Cody (1994) argue that legitimate power leads to changes in both public behavior and private beliefs. Further, families often reference cultural norms that indicate who holds legitimate power. For instance, some families grant fathers more power than mothers because a masculine cultural orientation dictates that fathers are the head of the house (Goodwin, 1999). These families adhere to what Bernstein (1971) first called positional power structures (i.e., power based on beliefs in tradition or status) versus person-oriented power structures (i.e., power granted to a person based on individual needs and personalities, without regard to traditional positions in the family).

Referent power refers to power based on liking and identification. The idea, for example, is that parents who have built a good relationship with their adolescent children probably have better luck influencing them than those who have severely strained relationships with their teenagers. Referent power also stems from shared interests. A colleague of ours recently mentioned, "I spent a lot of time watching the World Cup—I have a son-in-law who is really into soccer, so I try to keep up on soccer to connect with him." Sometimes shared interests facilitate relationships of liking and identification. The hypothesis behind referent power is that people will change their behavior at the prompting of others they like. A father-in-law's shared interest might prompt this son-in-law to visit and stay more in contact. The other twist of referent power is that it leads to changes in both public behavior and private, internalized beliefs (Bettinghaus & Cody, 1994).

Finally, *expert power* explains the power a target grants to a source because the target believes the source has superior training or ability. One spouse may have more power over financial decisions in the family because he or she simply has more expertise in managing money. The key is that the source has some information or background that the target respects but does not have. This type of influence leads to changes in public behavior and private beliefs (Bettinghaus & Cody, 1994).

Social Exchange Theory

Around the same time that French and Raven wrote about bases of power, Thibaut and Kelly (1959) introduced social exchange theory and began to theorize about how resource exchange relates to power. *Social exchange theory* is based on the premise that people view their relationships in economic terms, considering the costs and rewards in their relationships. As rational beings, people seek out more rewards than costs, and this balance affects relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, people evaluate their relationships based on a comparison level (i.e., the standard they feel they should be receiving in terms of costs and rewards) as well as a comparison level for alternatives (i.e., the rewards they think are available in other relationships). Even though the theory assumes that people make rational choices about how to maintain their relationships based on costs and rewards, it is often not just one relational partner making choices about the relationship. Both individuals simultaneously make choices, especially in voluntary relationships, like romantic and marital relationships. This results in what Huston and Burgess (1979) call a “bartering of rewards and costs” and an evaluation of the relationship rather than simply another individual apart from the relationship (p. 4). Hence, it is important to remember the “social” part of social exchange theory. In some cases, it is not possible for family members to make choices about remaining in a relationship based on costs and rewards (e.g., in the case of young children or an abused spouse). Family relationships of obligation can leave individuals with little option of dissolving the relationships, even if costly.

Costs and rewards come in many forms. Foa and Foa (1976) suggest six resources that have exchange value in relationships. Abstract resources include information, love, and status. Concrete or material resources include money, goods, and services. Not every resource is weighted equally. Consider marriages with clearly separated roles: one spouse makes the money and the other takes care of the home. In some such marriages, making money and taking care of the home are weighted as equal resources and power is egalitarian. In other marriages, the breadwinner claims more power because making money is weighted as a more important resource.

Resources are related to power in family relationships, but not necessarily in predictable ways. On the surface, it seems logical that people with more resources would have more power. However, one criticism of social exchange theory is that it is difficult to test the theory because outsiders cannot attach a concrete value to each resource. Resource value is a matter of perception (Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993). Studies of status-reversal couples indicate that exchange theories often fail to explain power dynamics in marriage. Tichenor (1999) found that when the breadwinner is male (e.g., a traditional marriage), couples typically weight making money as a more important resource than taking care of the home. In status-reversal couples, where the primary breadwinner is female, “economic resources have a relatively minimal impact on women’s power in terms of control over money, decision making, and the division of domestic labor” (p. 638). Status-reversal wives, in general, still bear the larger burden of domestic labor. Yet in the Tichenor study, wives as a group did not see the labor burden as unfair because they judged their success as a wife by how much they contributed to home life rather than how much money they made. “Stay-at-home fathers and husbands who contribute a smaller proportion of the family income are accorded [the power of] provider status that is unthinkable for women in similar circumstances” (Tichenor, 1999, p. 649). Adding another nuance to the argument, Steil (1997) found that power is accorded differently depending on whether women have children or not. Women with children appear to have more household responsibility and less influence than their husbands, regardless of whether they earn as much or more than their husbands. For women without children, influence increased and household expectations decreased to the extent that they were able to earn more money.

Tichenor (1999) argues that much of power in marriages and families is *hidden power*—covert power that cannot be observed or calculated according to social exchange theory.

Hidden power may be related to gender ideology or other implicit ideologies, and it reveals itself in communication (e.g., family stories, secrets, rules) and family structure (e.g. roles). “Clearly, there is a material component to equality in marriage, but it is not income or status that translates into power. It is the [symbolic] meaning attached to these contributions that seems to be primary” (Tichenor, 1999, p. 649).

Sources of Power in Families: Perception, Relational History, and Cultural Norms

Dyadic Power Theory (DPT) (Dunbar, 2004) focuses on power in close relationships. DPT emphasizes that because power is socially constructed, it is important to acknowledge how perception, relational history/interaction, and cultural norms affect power processes in families, in addition to forces of social exchange and resources. To begin, being powerful requires that other people perceive themselves to be dependent or under one’s control. This is a matter of perception, and the perception of both people in a relationships matters. When an adolescent takes the view that “my parents can’t control me and I don’t need anything from them anyway,” the parents lose power from the adolescent’s perspective. The view that power is influenced by perception is grounded in Symbolic Interaction Theory (see chapter 2), which argues that meaning is created in interaction between people and modified through communicative and interpretive processes. Families negotiate their own unique symbolic meanings. In some families there is little room for negotiation and adolescents cannot even envision an alternative power structure. In other cases, parents and adolescents are constantly reestablishing power processes in their relationship.

Acknowledging that power is a communication *process* highlights the influence of relational history on power. Power can be thought of as “the ongoing confrontation of power inputs among family members” (Sprey, 1972, p. 236). Past power inputs affect current and future power inputs, and often serve as justifications (e.g., “I should get to decide this time because you decided the last time” or “This is the way it has always been and always will be in our family”). To understand power, one must understand something about the history of the family or relational system.

Cultural norms and values strongly influence perceptions of power. Hofstede (1980) isolated several dimensions of cultural variability, some of which relate to family power processes. One dimension of cultural variability, *power–distance*, refers to the degree to which people expect and accept hierarchy. People from large power–distance countries such as the Philippines, Mexico, and India often expect and accept hierarchy in family power. Childrearing practices in large power–distance cultures emphasize that children should obey their parents (Hofstede, 1994). Some families with large power–distance orientations also adhere to family positional hierarchy, such that a father authoritatively leads, followed by an eldest son (Neuliep, 2009).

Another dimension of cultural variability, *masculinity–femininity*, refers to the degree to which people view sex roles as gender specific versus fluid (Gudykunst & Lee, 2001). In the case of this dimension, a masculine orientation refers to people who see sex roles as gender specific (e.g., fathers run family finances and administer discipline whereas mothers care for children and cook). A feminine orientation refers to fluid sex roles where males and females are assigned family tasks and decision making power not by their sex but by expertise or practicality. In low power–distance and high femininity (i.e., fluid sex roles) cultures, mothers and fathers dominate children less and emphasize gender role equality in the family (Goodwin, 1999). In masculine cultures, where sex roles are gender specific, women are more likely to seek marital partners with masculine traits such as wealth and status versus personality and affection (Goodwin, 1999).

Pyke (1999) demonstrates how another major cultural orientation, individualism–collectivism, influences power processes between adult children and aging parents. As we

described in chapter 1, *individualism–collectivism* refers to a person's focus on the self versus the group. Collectivism emphasizes concern for the family group over the individual, and focuses on group harmony, interdependence, and duty to the group (Neuliep, 2009). Collectivism is common in countries such as China, India, and Mexico. Individualism stresses self fulfillment and achievement, personal autonomy, and a distinct self-identity. Individualism is common in the U.S., and even more so in countries such as Finland and New Zealand. According to Pyke (1999), aging parents in collectivist families often receive high levels of care, but pay for this care with a decrease in power whereby they accept the influence of their adult children. Collectivist elders are more likely to “back down” from conflict, mind their own interests rather than offering advice and criticism to their children, and in fact repress their own interests in favor of their children's. In comparison, aging parents in individualist families retain more power, but pay for it with less family assistance. Because individualist elders do not look to their children for as much care, they apparently perceive more freedom to express their own opinions, advice, and criticism to their children. Pyke's research is also a good example of how power processes are interactional and rooted in cultural norms.

Family Roles Related to Power

Family power structures are revealed in the roles family members play and the rules they enforce. In *patriarchal* families, power centers around one powerful male, generally a father or grandfather. This person takes on the primary leadership role, making decisions and rules, while the rest of the members follow. Tsushima and Viktor (2001) argue that less powerful family members are typically more adaptable role takers and followers simply because they have learned to be adaptable as a coping mechanism: “The powerless need to adjust to the powerful more than the reverse” (p. 68). *Matriarchal* families are similar to patriarchal ones, except that a mother or grandmother takes on the primary leadership role. In single-parent families, where there is no other adult in the home to share and negotiate power, matriarchal or patriarchal power structures are common (Tsushima & Viktor, 2001).

In families with *democratic authority*, the leadership role is not yoked to one specific member, and there may in fact be more than one leader (e.g., mother and father). All family members have some role in decision making, and even non-leaders are consulted for input. Families that are high in conversation-orientation pride themselves on a democratic authority, whereby all members are encouraged to voice opinions in an unrestrained way (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004; see chapter 3). Regarding democratic authority between marital partners, Craddock (1988) found that Australian couples who had congruent egalitarian expectations for marital roles were more satisfied in the areas of personality issues, communication, conflict resolution, leisure activities, and family and friends than were couples in which the male had traditional role expectations and the female egalitarian expectations. Even though research on U.S. couples has shown that there are multiple ways to structure roles and make marriage successful (Fitzpatrick, 1988a; Gottman, 1994), mismatched role expectations and power imbalances appear to be problematic for couples, especially as cultural gender expectations are transformed (Gottman & Notarius, 2002). In fact, Cook et al. (1995) found that asymmetries in power or influence were predictive of divorce. Still, in some research, mostly dated research or masculine culture-specific research, husbands report less satisfaction when their wives have more say in decisionmaking (Steil, 1997).

Some families have a *child-centered* power structure. Here the children's wishes and intentions dictate the family's course of action and the parents literally build their lives around the children. These families exhibit role reversals (e.g., children leading parents) and often boundary confusion (i.e., confusion over what behavior is appropriate for a parent or child). Although single-parent families are not necessarily child-centered, children in such families theoretically have more influence than children from two-parent families (Ahuja & Stinson, 1993).

Finally, in *dispersed* families there is no central leader or it is not clear who is in charge. Members do their own thing without regard for other family members.

Although it is appealing to quickly attach a label, such as patriarchal or child-centered, to describe a family's power and role structure, Broderick (1993) advises caution. He argues that patterns of family power are often not stable across time and context. For example, family roles can differ from public to private spheres. Females may be submissive in public and dominant in private, or vice versa (Goodwin, 1999; Sillars, 1995). Broderick (1993) further proposes that understanding power in families must begin with an analysis of rules that undergird power processes. Power is manifested in the creation and enforcement of family rules.

Family Rules Related to Power

The establishment and enforcement of family rules are related to power. Family rules can be organized according to four levels: (1) the family paradigm, (2) mid-range policies, (3) metarules, and (4) concrete rules (Broderick, 1993). The *family paradigm* refers to a "set of shared assumptions, expectations, and commitments that constitute each family's operational philosophy of governance" (Broderick, 1993, p. 166). The family paradigm represents overarching ideals that fundamentally set the tone for more specific rules in the family. It is often parents who exercise the power to establish a family paradigm. Broderick offers three examples of paradigms. In a *competitive paradigm*, each member looks out for himself or herself, prioritizing individual concerns over the group. One can imagine how this paradigm is manifested in concrete rules and tenets of the family—tenets such as "You've got to look out for yourself" or mottos such as "You snooze, you lose" (i.e., whoever lays claim to a resource first owns it). In a *policy-governed paradigm*, individuals submit to family-governed policies, and submit requests for change to the family's governing process, perhaps in a family meeting or discussion. Broderick (1993) presents concrete rules that guide the governing and discussion process, for example, "There is no need to yell at each other. Let's all take turns speaking" (p. 167). A *principled-interaction paradigm* requires that members are mature enough to internalize principles such as mutual respect, empathy, and equity, without being reminded of these principles in specific rules. Family paradigms represent the family's typical style of functioning. However, when families face unusual circumstances, they may be required to default to rules consistent with another paradigm or to change the paradigm entirely in dramatic or severely stressful situations.

Mid-range policies, the second level of rules, are "less generic than the overarching family paradigms . . . but still broad enough to subsume a wide range of [concrete rules]" (Broderick, 1993, p. 169). Mid-range policies direct members to how they should generally act in certain contexts (e.g., "Each child should participate in his or her fair share of the family chores"). Note, though, that this rule is not so concrete as to spell out what specific chore should be conducted and how. Because mid-range rules are directed toward certain sectors of family life (e.g., chores, manners, time with friends), Broderick calls them "sector-specific." *Metarules*, the third level of rules, are sometimes thought of as rules about rules. Metarules are rules that describe the circumstances under which the most specific level rules, or *concrete rules*, apply. Thus, if a concrete rule states that "Mario must take the trash out each week," the metarule comments on how this rule is played out. The metarule may state that if Mario is sick, then he does not have to fulfill his duties. At the level of metarules, family members negotiate their rules. Metarules can be negotiated through bargaining for resources in the competitive family, through policy debate in the policy-governed family, and through appeals to clarify issues or work toward the common good in the principled family (Broderick, 1993).

Concrete rules can be articulated in a regulative or constitutive nature. Either way, they are specific. *Regulative rules* provide a guide to behavior. Regulative rules tell family members what behaviors are appropriate, obligatory, and prohibited, and are often verbalized as

“You must” or “You have to” (e.g., “You must say please and thank you”). Gralinski and Kopp (1993) found that when dealing with infants and young toddlers, mothers enforce only a few regulative rules, mostly ones related to safety issues (e.g., don’t touch the stove, hold hands to cross the street), basic preservation of family possessions (e.g., don’t play with the remote control, don’t write on walls), and basic social rules (e.g., don’t bite). At about 18 months of age, mothers dramatically increase their reliance on a wide variety of regulative rules, in particular, introducing rules about relating with other people and social or family etiquette. In addition to regulative rules, *constitutive rules* interpret the meaning of family behaviors (e.g., “Talking back to your parents is a sign of disrespect” or “Talking about money in public is rude”).

Family rules are relationship agreements specific to the family system. Some rules are explicit, meaning they are evident in conversation or verbally agreed to. Other rules are implicit; they are unspoken, inferred from the way people interact, and may remain unspoken until they are violated. When implicit rules are violated, family members know it by the verbal, nonverbal, and emotional feedback they receive (Feinauer, Larson, & Harper, 2010). *Rule sanctioning* refers to consequences that are in store if the rule is violated. When they sense that there will be negative sanctions for violating a parental rule about sun protection or exercise, adolescents and young adults are more likely to comply (Bylund, Baxter, Imes, & Wolf, 2010). Parental modeling is perhaps an even more effective way for parents to secure compliance to rules than sanctions, for example, Bylund et al. also discovered that when children see their parents practice good nutrition and sun protection, they are more likely to join in adherence to the rule.

DECISION MAKING IN FAMILIES

Like power, decision making is an ongoing family process, influenced by past decisions and influential in the future. Decision making is acutely related to power processes because powerful members have more influence in decisions. Here, we explore the nature of family decision making as well as models and styles of family decision making.

The Nature of Decisions

Families make some decisions that are rather simple or even trivial (e.g., what television show to watch) and others that are more complex and serious (e.g., whether to move an aging parent to a care home). Decisions are commonly distinguished as instrumental or affective. *Instrumental decisions* involve solving functional issues and are often, though not always, more basic. Examples include deciding what to buy at the store, what house to buy, what to eat. *Affective decisions* are based on emotions. They involve resolving conflicts and choices related to values, roles, and feelings. When partners agree that they have drifted so far apart that it is no use investing in the relationship any more, they are making an affective decision regarding the way they feel about the relationship. Realistically, many of the decisions made in life have both instrumental and affective components. For example, deciding how to care for an aging parent involves affective issues of emotion and values as well as instrumental issues regarding how the care will take place.

Another way to distinguish decision making in the family revolves around who is making the decision. Sometimes families are faced with group decisions. Other times, individual family members make decisions that affect the entire family. In Olson’s connected and enmeshed families (see chapter 1), members take great care in making individual decisions because they know that their individual decisions will impact the family as a whole. In separated or disengaged families, individuals have less concern for how individual decisions will impact the family.

Models and Styles of Family Decision Making

Because the family system is an ever-changing unit, every decision a family makes is unique, even if the type of decision is repetitive. Models and styles of decision making point to common methods of decision making and common processes that operate to influence each unique family decision. We first examine Turner's styles of decision making and then explore Settles' model of family decision making.

Turner's Decision Making Styles

Turner (1970) identified three common family decision making styles: consensus, accommodation, and *de facto*. On one hand, Turner's decision making styles now seem to be a rather simplistic view of a very complex family process. Yet, unlike some other general group decision making models, Turner specifically had the family in mind. More recently, group communication scholars have brought a modern sophistication to the study of group decision making (see Hirokawa & Salazar, 1999), and given that that family is a group, (Socha, 1999), there is still a need to integrate group and family decision making research.

The first of Turner's decision making styles, *consensus*, requires that all family members agree before a decision is made. This is the least common decision making style. It is easy to understand why consensus rarely happens when one considers how hard it is to get *all* the members of a family to agree on one decision. Yet some families take consensus decision making very seriously and find great satisfaction in it. Epstein et al. (1983), who conceptualized the McMaster model of Family Functioning (see chapter 1), name seven steps that encourage consensus decisions in the family. These include: (1) identifying the problem, (2) communicating the problem, (3) developing alternatives, (4) making a decision on one alternative, (5) putting the decision into effect, (6) monitoring the action, and (7) evaluating and modifying the decision. Clearly, enacting these steps demands that the family has adequate time, social skills, and concern for a balanced power structure where the input from all members is encouraged. Some families call special family meetings to ensure that they have the time to attend to the consensus decision making process.

Accommodation decision making involves acquiescing or adapting to the decision of another family member. One or two family members decide and the rest of the family members go along with the decision. Accommodation decisions are also influenced by power processes, as more powerful members usually decide based on their overt or covert power and less powerful members then accommodate. Sometimes family members choose to accommodate, when the outcome of the decision is not that important to them. Other times family members are forced to accommodate. Imagine parents who decide to relocate to a new region of the country and the children have no choice but to go. Decisions by majority vote are also an example of accommodation decision making, whereby the minority must accommodate to the majority of family members. One of the strengths of accommodation is that decisions are made quickly, compared to time-consuming processes of consensus decision making. With its strengths, accommodation can be problematic, for instance when the same family member makes the decisions all the time and the needs of other members are not considered. This is often the case in rigid families, as described by Olson. When there is no room for negotiation, tensions do not get aired and members are more likely to react to perceptions of overly strict and autocratic family functioning.

Finally, in *de facto* decision making, the situation decides for the family. An example of *de facto* decision making is when the family does nothing or cannot agree, and eventually, after the passing of time, the decision either resolves itself or is determined by situational factors. Imagine a family who cannot decide whether their young children should attend private or public school. After endless discussions that get them nowhere and procrastination in the application process, the family eventually realizes that the deadline has passed for applications

to the private school. The decision is made by the situation, and the children attend public school. Like the accommodation decision making style, de facto decisions occur frequently in families.

Settles' Model of Decision Making

Settles' (1999) model of decision making (see Figure 4.1) explores the degree of choice families have when making decisions. The model considers processes that operate to expand or limit a family's degree of choice or, using the model's term, their *area of choice*. While Turner's decision making styles take a micro-level approach, studying the actual decision-making process itself, Settles' model takes a macro-level perspective, describing the social, familial, environmental, and individual forces that affect family decisions. The type of choice and degree of choice a family has regarding any given decision are affected by the following factors: awareness, roles, social structure, resources, skills, personality, norms, and other constraints. In the model, these factors form a boundary around the area of choice. This boundary can be expanded or contracted to depict the degree of choice. Settles also explains that the boundary may not necessarily be symmetrical, because the boundary can be expanded by some factors and constricted by others.

The first factor, *awareness*, refers to the degree to which the family is aware of the decision and options related to the decision. It also encompasses the family's perception of the decision. At one extreme, families may not be aware of a decision, or if they are, they may not perceive many options. For example, microcultures such as the Amish purposely limit outside influences that could introduce them to options in the larger world. This lack of awareness constricts the area of choice. Is this always negative for families? Settles (1999) proposes there is sometimes freedom in limitations. For example, living in a very remote, rural, or mountainous area is perceived as freeing to some, though it limits the area of choice. On the other extreme, some

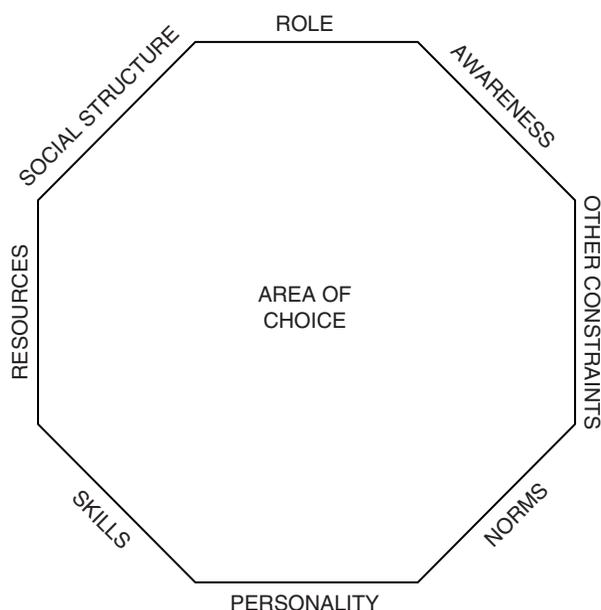


Figure 4.1 Settles' (1999) model of family decision making.

Note. From *Handbook of Marriage and Family* (p. 161), by B.H. Settles, 1999, New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers. Copyright 1999 by Plenum. Reprinted with permission.

families are highly conscious of their decision and the options available to them. This high level of awareness can both relieve and overwhelm families.

The second factor in the model involves *roles*. Individuals who participate in a variety of roles are likely to have had diverse life experiences, introducing them to different types of people, skills, groups, and interests. Experience with multiple roles expands the area of choice. In comparison, people who play few roles and play them rigidly only have limited ways of acting upon and viewing decisions.

With regard to *social structure*, most families hope for mobility in order to expand their area of choice. Settles explains that the social structure of contemporary society offers many individuals and families flexible opportunities for geographic mobility, educational and vocational mobility, and even class mobility. Theoretically, the opportunity for social mobility gives families more options when making decisions.

Resources and *skills* are two other factors that affect the area of choice. Important resources include time, energy, money, material goods, expert advice, and social or physical support. Skills, including communication skills, trade skills, or academic skills are important in part because they open many resources to families. Besides affecting the size of the area of choice, communication skills are a means for discussing options and ultimately making decisions that stem from the area of choice.

Personality, including “a person’s predispositions, inclinations, and sense of the self[,] is useful for identifying choices that a person will be comfortable in examining” (Settles, 1999, p. 162). As Settles further describes, a personal phobia (e.g., a social phobia) limits options regarding specific decisions, such as participation in the community. *Norms*, or expectations of appropriate behavior, impact the area of choice as well. Legal and social norms influence the choices parents have for nurturing and disciplining children or the choices couples have for dissolving a marriage. Conforming to norms restricts choice, and this can be useful for social order. On the other hand, deviating from norms allows more choice, which has costs and benefits. Finally, Settles (1999) explains that “at any one time there may be events that precipitate decision-making or planning or that limit individuals and their families from assuming control over their life course” (e.g., wars, famines, economic shifts, plant closing) (p. 162). In the model, Settles terms these events *other constraints*.

Settles’ model is useful because it acknowledges that decision making processes in an open system, such as the family, are influenced by elements both internal and external to the system. Even seemingly simple decisions are embedded within unique, complex systems. *Requisite variety*, a concept from family systems theory, explains that systems are asked to respond to everything they encounter using a variety of skills and factors. According to Settles’ model, families respond to decisions using a variety of factors. Ultimately the degree of choice they have regarding decisions is related to the variety (or lack of variety) of skills, resources, awareness, constraints, etc., around them.

Topics of Family Decisions

Scholars have studied how families make decisions about a variety of topics. Two areas that have received considerable attention are family decisions about (1) consequential matters or crisis situations, and (2) consumer purchasing and food choices. We explore some of these consequential decisions in subsequent chapters. Examples of consequential or crisis decisions include decisions related to getting married, divorced, remarried, or having children (see chapters 5, 6, 12, and 13), age-related decisions such as retirement or choosing a college (see chapter 11), and family health decisions (see chapter 15). In chapter 10, we also discuss how families decide to handle stress. One theme that arises from the study of consequential decisions is that families vary dramatically in the way they make these consequential decisions, and that individuals within a family often disagree about how to handle major decisions

and crises. In this present chapter, we explore how families make everyday decisions about consumer purchasing and food choices.

Decisions About Consumer Purchasing and Food Choices

Marketing consumer researchers want to know who makes the decisions in the family regarding their product and then how to influence the primary decision maker. Recently, marketing researchers have become “friends” with communication researchers, after recognizing that family communication patterns influence family decision making.

When it comes to product purchases, parents have the last say in a majority of decisions, especially with children under 12 (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2008). The more mothers contribute to family income, the more significant the influence they have in everyday purchasing decisions (Lee & Beatty, 2002). Even though parents have the last say a majority of the time, their purchasing influence is closely matched by that of even their young children. Children often underestimate the degree of influence they actually have in family purchasing decisions (Labrecque & Line, 2001). Tweens (children aged 7–12) directly spend about \$43 billion a year and influence the spending of billions more (Newswise, 2009). Greenmuze (2009) estimates that children under 12 influence the spending of \$700 billion a year by adults.

Children’s purchasing influence has increased in recent years, in part because of more exposure to advertising in the media. Children who watch more television are more aware of product options and brands, and they ask their parents to buy these advertised products more (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2008). The more income they have, the more parents welcome and invite their children to make product choices (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2008). Besides influencing small purchasing decisions, like what kind of cereal or toys to buy, children also influence parents’ choice of cars, computers, and vacation destinations (McNeal, 1999). Hsiung and Bagozzi (2003) found that adolescent children were consistently persuasive in decisions about what car to buy, even though they did not wield the amount of influence the parents did. When parents disagree about purchasing decisions, they often use the wishes of the child to settle the purchasing dispute, even when it comes to major purchases (Kirchler, Rodler, Hölzl, & Meier, 2001).

A child’s developmental level and family communication patterns play significant roles in shaping family decision making. Children under the age of 6 make the most attempts to influence purchasing in supermarket and toy store settings, and preschoolers make a lot of their purchasing requests in coercive ways (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2008). Measuring the effectiveness of children’s influence attempts in these settings, Buijzen and Valkenburg (2008) found that children under 6 were only successful in influencing a product purchase about one-quarter of the time. By age 9, they were successful more than half the time. As children age, they probably learn that simple coercive tactics like tantrums and crying can be replaced by more “sophisticated” persuasive strategies and negotiation (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2008).

Tweens and adolescents can drain a parent’s bank account because they often begin to desire more costly products. They become more brand and fashion conscious, and they develop hobbies and recreational activities that call for expensive accessories. The way parents communicate with their adolescent children about these purchase decisions is important, in part because adolescents are learning consumer and money management skills that they will need later when they have to make their own purchasing decisions (Kim, Lee, & Tomiuk, 2009). Kim et al. found that mothers who communicate with their adolescents in a conversation-oriented (or concept-oriented) style, where an open exchange of ideas is encouraged, have adolescents who made more “utilitarian” decisions and “social/conspicuous” decisions. In other words, these adolescents are thinking about which purchases are the best value for their money, and whether their purchases are consistent with their social values. For example, social

values can prompt purchasing questions like, “How much does it matter if I wear expensive name brands or have the latest fashion?” and “Do I still want to buy this product if it may have been made under unfair labor practices?” If these are topics an adolescent talks about freely with his/her mother, then the adolescent is “trained” to think about these topics when making decisions alone. Mothers who communicate with their adolescents in a conformity-oriented (or socio-oriented) style, where children are encouraged to conform to parental control, have adolescents who do not trust their own purchasing abilities, are confused by multiple choices, and make impulsive or careless decisions.

When it comes to learning healthy eating behaviors and choices, adolescents also appear to benefit from a conversation (concept-oriented) family communication style (Kaplan, Kiernan, & James, 2006; Olsen & Ruiz, 2008). Families who talk openly about what it means to eat healthily and who actively involve children in food planning, shopping, and meal preparation, have fewer conflicts about food-related decisions (Kaplan et al., 2006). In the Kaplan study, when parents and adolescents had appropriately guided and open exchanges about eating healthily, children developed values for eating healthily that were not externally imposed but internally driven, and children were empowered to be a force in helping the family to eat better. This conversation, concept-oriented communication style is different from parents with a critical and controlling style pervasive in adolescents with eating disorders (see chapter 14). It is also different from family environments where adolescents hold all the power and responsibility in their decisions about what to eat and then make less healthy food choices without any sound guidance from parents (De Bourdeaudhuij & Van Oost, 1998).

CONFLICT IN FAMILIES

Of the three family communication processes we discuss in this chapter, conflict has arguably received the most attention (Sillars, Canary, & Tafoya, 2004). This attention has not come without regard to the way other family processes such as power and decision making affect the course of conflict. In fact, these other relational processes are often the very topic of conflict (e.g., conflict over who gets to make decisions). The intent of this section on family conflict is simply to introduce common family conflict topics, explore the frequency of family conflict, and, most importantly, introduce common strategies and tactics that family members use for dealing with conflict. The conflict strategies that family members use stem from the family’s communication context and are also related to individual members’ perceptions of the conflict. Further, the conflict patterns that people are repeatedly exposed to in their family of origin often become default patterns for dealing with conflict in other non-familial relationships or in one’s family of orientation. An overview of these topics will set the stage for more attention to specific types of family conflict in later chapters.

Family Conflict Topics

If conflict is, as Hocker and Wilmot (1998) say, a struggle between two or more interdependent parties who perceive “incompatible goals, scarce resources and interference from the other,” (p. 12) then the family system is ripe for conflict. Noller and Fitzpatrick (1993) are not exaggerating when they say that within a family system anything can become an issue (p. 102). Interdependent family members share so many resources and so much time that conflict is inevitable and even normative (Sillars et al., 2004).

Topics of family conflict involve *content* issues (e.g., household chores, money) and *relationship* issues (e.g., love, power, parental attention, values). However, this distinction is hardly ever clear-cut. Conflicts about seemingly simple content topics, such as which sibling

gets to roll the dice first in a board game, may be embedded in larger relationship conflicts like sibling power struggles and conflict over parental attention.

What topics do family members fight about the most? Among married couples, Storaasli and Markman (1990) found that topics involving friends, religion, and jealousy tend to decrease over time, while topics regarding sex, communication, and recreation tend to increase over time (see also Rogge & Bradbury, 2002). In families with children, conflict between siblings is one of the most frequently reported family management problems (Perlman & Ross, 1997). In the parent-child context, mothers say that parental anger in the family is typically due to expectancy violations (e.g., children back-talking, a spouse not devoting sufficient attention to the family) (Carpenter & Halberstadt, 2000). Young children's anger is often related to goal blockages (e.g., parents not letting the child have a snack or a toy) (Carpenter & Halberstadt, 2000). Parents are usually trying to regulate their young children's behavior, often for purposes of socialization, and conflict develops as children resist these attempts (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006). Conflicts between parents and adolescents are commonly sparked by violated expectations (e.g., adolescents violated expectations from parents about privacy invasion) and differences in adolescents' or young adults' developing values (Dennis, Basañez, & Farahmand, 2010; Hawk, Keijsers, Hale, Meeus, 2009).

Even though many family conflicts stem from something internal to the family environment, in an open family system members receive inputs from the external environment that stimulate conflict as well. In chapter 11, for example, we explain how conflict at work can spill over to cause a conflict at home. In a related example, Padilla-Walker and Thompson (2005) explore how parents respond when their children encounter values outside the home that conflict with family values. Parents in their study reported that the two most common strategies they used to thwart potential conflicts were "reasoned cocooning" and "prearming." Reasoned cocooning involves protecting children from outside influences that conflict with parental values and providing reasoning for and encouragement toward parental values. In prearming, parents anticipate value conflicts that their children will encounter outside the home and they brainstorm with children about strategies for what to say and do to resist these situations. Not all types and topics of conflict are negative for the family system. Moderate amounts of conflict related to topics of autonomy and assertion of individuality are common in the parent-child relationship and are a normal part of child development (see chapter 7). Psychological separation theory (Hoffman, 1984) argues that individuation and independence are important to adolescents' adjustment, though this occurs within the parameters of one's cultural orientation. During this time, adolescents develop some degree of emotional autonomy or emotional uncoupling from parents. They learn to make independent decisions and disagree more with parental opinion (Steinmetz, 1999). When these conflicts occur within the context of parental support and acceptance, they encourage development of the youth's necessary skills at becoming independent. They also help prepare parents for the detachment associated with launching the child from the home as a young adult.

In courtship and marriage, many types of conflict are healthy for partners as a means of revealing their individual preferences and dreams that, if denied, could lead to more destructive conflict later. Noller and Feeney (2002) found that premarital reports on frequency of conflict were positively correlated with satisfaction for husbands later on in the marriage. To put these findings in context, husbands appeared to be happier in relationships where the partners had discussed conflict issues early on in the relationship. This may have prevented conflict issues from exploding later in marriage, or at least allowed spouses to be aware of the enduring issues that would surface in the course of the relationship should they choose to marry the person.

Family Conflict Frequency

How much do families experience conflict? In one of the few observational studies of family conflict frequency, Vuchinich (1987) recorded 64 family dinners in nondistressed families in

order to see how much conflict occurred and how the conflicts started and stopped. According to Vuchinich, “nondistressed families (those not experiencing problems so serious that they seek professional help)” were able “to strike a delicate balance between enough conflict to realize the positive benefits, but not too much conflict, which would disrupt family relationships” (p. 591).

It is worth pointing out that this “delicate balance” is probably not the same in every family. Research on married couples shows that some couples fight a lot, some a little, and others anywhere in between (Gottman, 1999). The amount of conflict is not what predicts marital satisfaction, but rather the form of the conflict and the balance of positive to negative interactions. The key to success for couples who fight a lot is that they offset their negative interactions with enough positive interactions, at least 5 positive interactions to 1 negative interaction according to Gottman (1999). The same theory would seem to hold true in whole family interactions. With this in mind, what did the “delicate balance” look like in the Vuchinich study? And who was most likely to start and stop the family conflicts?

To begin, the family dinners averaged 15 minutes in length with an average of 3.3 verbal conflict episodes per dinner. A verbal conflict episode was defined as a square-off where one person initiated an opposition and the other returned an opposition. Around one-third of the potential conflicts were “nipped in the bud.” The conflict was avoided or corrected before it ever happened. For example, some oppositions were framed as a correction or command, the correction or command was accepted, and no further conflict ensued (e.g., A child was told to quit eating with her fingers, and the child agreed). Of the potential verbal conflict episodes, there was a 1/3 avoid to 2/3 fight ratio, which reveals how these nondistressed families balanced conflict avoidance and conflict engagement. No single family role (e.g., mothers, fathers, or children) appeared to dominate the initiation of verbal conflicts. Parents initiated nearly half of the conflicts, and children initiated just over half. However, fathers only had half as many conflicts initiated against them compared to mothers, daughters, and sons.

According to Vuchinich (1987) family conflicts are usually stopped in one of four ways:

- (1) Submission: One person in the conflict “gives in” to another by agreeing or going along with the other.
- (2) Compromise: The disputing members each “give a little” and find a “middle ground” that they both can accept.
- (3) Standoff: The members drop the conflict without resolution by agreeing to disagree and move on.
- (4) Withdrawal: One party leaves the interaction by refusing to talk or leaving the room. Family conflict is disrupted by negative affect and unlike the other three methods, the family is not able to smoothly transition to other activities.

Of these four methods, 61% of the conflicts eventually ended in a standoff. This means that even in nondistressed families, a majority of conflicts do not get resolved in one episode. The conflict may not get resolved because of a lack of time or skills, because it is not really a big deal, or alternatively because the issue is so serious that there is no apparent solution.

The idea that many family conflicts end without resolution relates to Gottman’s (1999) description of solvable and perpetual types of conflict. *Solvable* conflicts can be resolved, while perpetual conflicts, or as other scholars like Bevan (2010) term *serial arguments*, are a part of family life forever. In a solvable conflict, a family member brings up a problem or conflict and, with the right conflict resolution tactics, another member offers an answer or solution. *Perpetual conflicts* or *serial arguments* are deeply rooted in disagreements over larger issues (e.g., values, roles, personality traits) and, as the terms “perpetual” and “serial” suggest, they resurface again and again in families and never get resolved. We expand on this distinction between solvable and perpetual problems again in the chapter on marriage and intimate partnerships (chapter 6).

Conflict Frequency and Relationship Type, Stage, and Quality

Does conflict frequency vary by the type of family relationship, family stage, or the quality of the relationship? Across family relationship types, marital partners typically report only a few overt conflicts a *month*, parents and children report a handful of conflicts a *week*, and young siblings in close contact have been observed to have numerous conflicts within just one *hour* (Sillars et al., 2004). On one hand, we could conclude that conflict is most dramatic in the sibling relationship. Indeed, physical violence is most common in the sibling relationship (occurring in 36% of sibling relationships), followed by the parent–child relationships (11%), and then marital relationships (8%) (Straus & Gelles, 1990). However, Sillars et al. (2004) are quick to point out that the number of conflicts may not be as significant as the intensity and type of conflict. Even though marital partners report fewer overt conflicts a month, those conflicts may be severe and unresolvable compared to some sibling conflicts that are short-lasting and easy to mend. In addition, it is difficult to compare spouses' and children's reports of conflict, which may be biased, to researchers' observations of conflict.

In marriage, conflict frequency has been associated with marital stages. Couples experience heightened conflict as they make the adjustment to marriage (Crohan, 1996). Another critical stage surges after the birth of the first child. The stress associated with the birth of the first baby exacerbates a couple's existing communication and relationship vulnerabilities, not to mention brings up new topics of conflict (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). In parent–child relationships, conflict frequency is also associated with life stage. Toddlerhood and adolescence are two important stages (see chapter 7). In toddlerhood, children begin to assert and even verbalize their own desires, and parents recognize the need to begin socializing boundaries, manners, and values. In adolescence, conflict in the parent–child relationship increases as adolescents attempt to renegotiate the amount of influence their parents have on them and explore their own independent identities and values. In sibling relationships, conflicts often decrease in old age (see chapter 8), as late life siblings focus more on their shared memories and their potential to support each other, while earlier issues, like competition over parental attention and shared resources, have dissipated. In chapter 11, we detail other family life stages that trigger conflict.

As for relationship quality and conflict frequency, family scientists generally agree that distressed couples and families experience more conflict than their nondistressed counterparts (Noller & Feeney, 2002). We give special attention to these conflicts among distressed families in our chapters on marriage (chapter 6), divorce (chapter 12), and family violence (chapter 16). The overall message is not just that non-distressed couples and families have less conflict, but most importantly, they are better at dealing with and repairing problems that come up in their relationships over time, while distressed couples and families lack the skill to successfully deal with conflict and/or are too oppressed by the relationship context to deal with conflict appropriately.

While skills are crucial to conflict management, contextual factors should not be discounted (Sillars et al., 2004). What is a concrete and easy to resolve conflict in the context of a non-distressed relationship may be a more profound and difficult to resolve issue in the context of a distressed relationship. Further, the context of any one family or relationship may change over time. Noller and Feeney (2002) discovered that unhappy spouses may have actually made “a concerted effort” early in the marriage to deal with conflict constructively, but by the time a few years of marriage had elapsed, they seemed to “revert to the more destructive patterns they used earlier” (p. 137).

Conflict Strategies and Tactics

Even though it is interesting to look at how often family members experience conflict and what their conflicts are about, how families deal with conflict is more consequential to the success of

family interaction. The amount of research on conflict strategies and tactics is truly overwhelming. Categorization systems like that of Rusbult and Zembrodt's (1983) Exit-Voice-Loyalty-Neglect model and Sillars, Canary, and Tafoya's (2004) categorization of conflict strategies and tactics deserve credit for organizing the research on conflict in interpersonal relationships. We describe these categorization systems in a moment. It is important to note that much of the research on conflict in families has focused on conflict in a dyad. Because the family group is more complex than most dyadic relationships, we also discuss additional conflict tactics that arise in families with more than two people, as well as the effect of conflict in one family dyad on the rest of the family.

Dyadic Conflict Strategies and Tactics

The Exit-Voice-Loyalty-Neglect (EVLN) model (Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1983) categorizes how people respond to conflict square-offs or destructive acts against them. It is really a model of conflict strategies, or general approaches to conflict, as opposed to the categorization system of Canary et al.'s that we discuss in a moment, which is one of both strategies and tactics, or behaviors (Canary & Lakey, 2006). The EVLN model has two primary dimensions: constructive versus destructive responses and active versus passive responses. Crossing the two dimensions yields four labels that globally characterize conflict strategies. *Exit* refers to destructive/active responses, such as walking out during an argument. Exit responses are thought to be most damaging to relationships. *Voice* involves constructive/active responses, such as openly discussing problems, behaviors which typically strengthen and improve relationships. *Loyalty* refers to constructive/passive responses, like waiting and hoping for problems to go away. These behaviors may be productive for relationships if the problems cannot be immediately resolved or might eventually diminish on their own. Finally, *neglect* involves destructive/passive responses, like refusing to discuss problems. Neglect typically leads to relationship stagnation and disrepair.

The EVLN model appears to capture common and natural responses to conflict. One weakness is that it does not adequately acknowledge that whether a given response is constructive or destructive depends on the situation or cultural context at hand (Simpson, Ickes, & Oriña, 2001). For example, even though direct strategies, or voice behaviors, are usually privileged in the U.S., these behaviors should be put off when family members are "too tired, too upset, or don't have all the information they need to discuss the issue" (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1993, p. 108). Furthermore, voice behaviors, in some situational or cultural contexts, may threaten another's face, and turn a small conflict into a greater threat to the relationship (Gudykunst, 1994).

Like the EVLN model, Canary et al.'s (2004) classification of conflict strategies and tactics begins with the same basic premise. That is, "people make two choices regarding how they communicate to the other person in conflict: first, people must decide how direct or indirect to be; second, people decide how cooperative or competitive they will be" (Canary & Lakey, 2006, p. 196). Answers to these two choices cross to classify conflict strategies into four categories that they term (1) direct and cooperative, (2) direct and competitive, (3) indirect and cooperative, and (4) indirect and competitive (see Canary et al.'s classification). The unique contribution of Canary et al.'s classification is that it goes beyond presenting general conflict strategies and lists specific conflict tactics or behaviors that have been observed in research on interpersonal conflict. Canary et al. also acknowledge that conflicts are always nested in a context, so choosing a conflict strategy or tactic and determining its effectiveness are affected by contextual factors such as how the conflict was instigated, individual differences (e.g., personality, locus of control), interpretation of the conflict (e.g., responsibility and causal attributions), and goals (Canary & Lakey, 2006). Our intent in this section is to lift up some of the conflict tactics in Canary et al.'s (2004) four-part classification, with special attention to conflict tactics that readers will encounter in subsequent chapters of this book.

The first of Canary et al.'s categories is "direct/cooperative." Direct/cooperative strategies give direct attention to the problem at hand, and usually do so in the context of positive affectivity. They include strategies like agreement, metacommunication (e.g., clarification and discussion about how members are communicating), expressing willingness to change, statements of support and understanding, positive problem solving, expressing feelings about a problem, validation, apology, acceptance of responsibility, and summarizing one's own and the other's position. Most of these and other tactics are discussed in the chapter on marriage and intimate partnerships (chapter 6).

Direct/competitive tactics focus on the problem at hand, but often in a context of negative affectivity. Examples of direct/competitive strategies include: personal criticisms, hostile remarks and demands, denial of responsibility, disagreement, invalidations, coercion, exploding and getting out of control, physical and verbal aggression, and negatively-toned mindreading. Canary and Lakey (2006) acknowledge that some direct/competitive strategies are not necessarily nested in destructive, negative affectivity. Some immediate demands or expressions of anger lead to productive confrontation and clear a path for a better relationship in the future. We discuss some of these exceptions in chapter 6, as compared to our discussion of direct/competitive tactics with negative relationship implications in chapter 12 (Divorce).

Indirect/cooperative tactics include expressing affection, changing the subject, redirecting the conversation, humor (without sarcasm), paraphrasing for understanding, questions, or requests to talk about the conflict at a time that is better. It is important not to underestimate the value of indirect/cooperative tactics. They are especially good at helping to soothe negative affect. Sometimes distracting attention from the problem at hand for a moment can make direct problem solving tactics more productive once couples return to the problem. In chapter 6, we review the work of Gottman and his colleagues that emphasizes how crucial the de-escalation of negative affect is for the course of conflict interactions. Finally, indirect/competitive tactics come in the form of denials, refusal to talk, withdrawal, shutting off discussion, and avoiding topics. We expand on one of the most well-known tactics of this category, what Gottman terms stonewalling, in chapter 12 (Divorce).

Beyond the Dyad: Triangulation in the Family Group

Research on conflict in dyads does not capture some of the complexities of conflict in the family group. Family conflicts that emerge between two members in a family often end up directly involving other family members, or at least indirectly affecting their well-being. *Triangulation* refers to a family systems process whereby two family members in conflict will draw in a third member to mediate the conflict or act as an ally (Buehler & Welsh, 2009). Why do people draw a third family member into conflict? Many people despise dealing with conflict and find appeal in involving a third party who could potentially diffuse tensions, distract from or minimize the conflict, carry messages to the opponent, or serve as an ally to bolster one's position (Buehler & Welsh, 2009). The problem for the third party is that they feel great tension with being caught in the middle, and they feel confused about boundaries (e.g., between parents and children), loyalties, and the source of blame (Fosco & Grych, 2007; Schrodt & Affi, 2007). The problem for the dyad who attempts to draw in a third member is that this strategy is rarely effective at solving the problems at hand, and ends up causing the family system more harm than good.

There is some research on the triangulation of parents into sibling disputes (see chapter 8). Sibling conflict is distressing to many parents. The parents of young children often enter into young siblings' conflicts with the good intentions of protecting their children from physical harm and modeling conflict management skills. But children soon learn that they can "tattle" on their siblings and draw their parents into the conflict with the hope of winning the backing of their parents in the conflict. Before many parents realize it, their children form perceptions

about being subject to unfair differential or preferential treatment from parents. McHale, Updegraff, Tucker, and Crouter (2000) caution parents against intruding to resolve sibling conflicts, especially once siblings reach adolescence and beyond. Besides the fact that adolescent children may not learn how to deal with conflict themselves if their parents are doing it for them, parental involvement may give rise to more negativity in the sibling relationship and family relationships.

By far, a majority of research on triangulation focuses on children who are drawn into interparental conflict. Parents that have frequent, intense, and seemingly unresolvable conflicts are those who are most likely to draw their children into triangulation (Fosco & Grych, 2010). For children, the effects of being drawn into hostile interparental conflict are dramatic and gloomy. Adolescents who are drawn into parents' conflicts are more likely to experience internalizing problems (e.g., feelings of depression, sadness, worthlessness) and feelings of self-blame about the parents' conflicts (Buehler & Welsh, 2009; Fosco & Grych, 2010). By following their participants over three years, Fosco and Grych found that these internalizing problems associated with triangulation even worsen with time for adolescents. The active agent that spawns internalizing problems is the state of heightened emotional reactivity that children experience when they are exposed to and caught in the middle of interparental conflict. To paraphrase Buehler and Welsh (2009), at the very time adolescents are supposed to be focusing on their own self-development and autonomy from parents, triangulation promotes boundary violations as adolescents are lured to side with one parent. Triangulation also holds adolescents in a state of "chronic emotional reactivity" (i.e., anxiety, fear, tension, resentment, and guilt) as they grapple with feelings of responsibility for saving their parents' marriage, changing the course of the conflict, or protecting one parent's interests.

In addition to internalizing problems, adolescents who are triangulated into marital conflict also experience more rejection and dislike from peers, more externalizing problems, and less support from friends (Buehler, Franck, & Cook, 2009). Simply put, "triangulation into marital conflict exposes youth to parents' negative conflict strategies . . . [such as] parents having difficulty regulating emotions, parents blaming one another for difficulties, and passive-aggressive conflict tactics such as sarcastic humor and manipulation" (Buehler et al., 2009, p. 684). Modeling these problematic conflict tactics does not engender good peer relationships.

Beyond the Dyad: The Effects of Dyadic Conflict on the Whole Family System

One message that is laced throughout subsequent chapters of this book is that conflict in one part of the family system usually spills over to taint other family relationships. We expand on this topic especially in chapter 7 (Parent–Child Communication), chapter 8 (Sibling Communication) and chapter 12 (Divorce). When they are exposed to high levels of interparental hostility, aggression, and ongoing disagreements, especially about child-related topics, children feel caught in the conflict (Schrodt & Afifi, 2007). Besides the fact that they suffer as individuals (e.g., they blame themselves for the conflict and report poorer quality mental health), their family relationships suffer (Fosco & Grych, 2007; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007). They experience less satisfaction with their families in general and say they feel "less closeness and support but more conflict and control with their mothers" (Yu, Pettit, Lansford, Dodge, & Bates, 2010, p. 290). In addition to compromised parent–child relationships, sibling relationships are often strained.

Family Conflict Patterns

Families develop routines and patterns of interaction, some of which are specific to dealing with conflict. In subsequent chapters of the book, we have the chance to focus on conflict patterns that are unique to certain family relationships, like the demand/withdrawal pattern that

is common among married or intimate partners (see chapters 6 and 11). In this chapter, we are interested in whole family conflict patterns, and the way these conflict patterns transfer to non-family relationships.

Family Communication Climates and Conflict Patterns

In chapter 3, we introduced the concept of family communication climates. Over time, families establish communication climates based on how much they encourage conversation, openness, and expressiveness (i.e., a conversation orientation) and how much they encourage conformity, suppression of conflict, structural traditionalism or the pressure to adhere to traditional beliefs (i.e., conformity orientation). As we explained in the last chapter, families can be classified into four types. *Pluralistic* families have a high conversation orientation and low conformity orientation. *Consensual* families have a high conversation orientation and also a high conformity orientation. *Protective* families are low in conversation and high in conformity. *Laissez faire* families are low in conversation and low in conformity.

In this chapter, we are interested in specifically exploring how families deal with conflict depending on their family communication climate. Communication in pluralistic families is open, frequent and unconstrained, and members are encouraged to think independently. This pluralistic family communication climate breeds a certain approach to conflict. Koerner and Fitzpatrick (1997) found pluralistic families to be characterized by extremely low conflict avoidance and low expression of negative feelings. Because of the freedom that pluralistic families have to express any topic, even negative topics, it seems at first glance counterintuitive that these families have a low expression of negative feelings. However, Koerner and Fitzpatrick speculate that because these family members have the freedom to discuss any topic, they preemptively deal with issues before they build up and thus experience more positive relationships than other families.

Consensual families are characterized by a tension between pressures to agree and an interest in open communication and the exploration of new ideas. The conflict episodes of consensual families contain a lot of venting of negative feelings. However, this venting does not necessarily endanger the closeness of members because they also seek social support from one another and try to deal with conflict positively.

Members of *laissez faire* families have few interactions and discuss a limited number of topics. Emotional involvement among members is typically low and members look outside the family for emotional connection. Conflict episodes are rare because they are usually avoided. Should conflict occur, it is usually uneventful because members do not care about seeking approval or support. Thus, there is little reason to express hostility.

Finally, *protective* families emphasize conformity and obedience. They largely avoid conflict, but occasionally vent negative feelings in bursts of hostile and unproductive conflict tactics. As a result, members have many unresolved conflicts with one another and are distressed by this underlying conflict, unlike members of *laissez faire* families who do not appear to care much about whether they disagree.

Family Conflict Patterns Spill Over to Family of Orientation or Non-family Relationships

Social learning theory predicts that conflict patterns might be learned in the family of origin and then transferred into other relationships contexts. As we mentioned earlier in this chapter, adolescents who are triangulated into hostile interparental conflict witness counterproductive conflict tactics that, theoretically, may be the source of their compromised peer relationships. In a well-designed study to test the social learning hypothesis, Whitton, Waldinger et al. (2008) observed 126 participants, at age 14, interact with their parents in a family conflict resolution task. Seventeen years later, at age 31, 47 of these same participants returned to the laboratory

with their marital (or committed) partners to engage in a videotaped interaction task. Adolescents who experienced hostility or, alternatively, positive engagement with their parents went on to experience many of the same behaviors with their spouses years later, especially in the case of hostility. In earlier research, Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2002a) also found that conflict patterns in one's family of origin influence the way young adults deal with conflict in their own romantic relationships. In particular, people who grew up in families with a high conformity orientation (whether protective or consensual) tended to exhibit more negative conflict behaviors in their romantic relationships, in the form of verbal aggression and forceful/coercive attempts to resist others. Family of origin conflict patterns even seem to carry over to non-romantic relationships. For example, Orrego and Rodriguez (2001) discovered that compared to young adults from pluralistic families, young adults from protective families experienced a more conflictual separation-individuation process when they left home to attend college. They resented their parents' demands for strict obedience and conformity, felt more guilt over unresolved issues, and consequently experienced more problems adjusting to college.

CONCLUSION

Family processes involving power, decision making, and conflict are like fingerprints. No one decision or conflict is the same. Yet, scholars have created useful models and theories to help explain the nature of these family processes. We began this chapter by exploring power, which refers to the ability to change the behavior or affect of another. Power is an interactional process, meaning that in order to be powerful, one must have another who is willing to submit. Family power is theoretically rooted in social bases of power, resource exchange theories, and gender/relational hierarchies. Family power can also be observed in family roles and rules.

Second, we examined processes of family decision making, which are intimately tied to who holds the power in the family. Interestingly, children often underestimate the amount of influence they actually have, especially in instrumental decisions. Family decisions are both instrumental (functional) and affective (emotion-driven), and decisions are affected by family structure, developmental changes, and external inputs to the family system. Turner models the micro-processes of decision making in families by pointing to three common styles of decision making: consensus, accommodation, and de facto. Settles proposes viewing family decision making on a macro-level, exploring social, familial, environmental, and individual forces that affect family decisions.

Third, family members live so interdependently that conflict is bound to occur. Conflict stems from content or relationship issues, and from the internal family environment or the external environment. Family conflicts vary by topic and frequency. Not all conflicts are destructive for family relationships; however, conflict mutually influences all family members, even if only some are overtly involved. Triangulation is one such destructive conflict tactic that is unique to the family group as opposed to dyadic conflict. Using categorization systems like that of Canary et al. (2004) and Rusbult and Zembrodt's Exit-Voice-Loyalty-Neglect model, we show how most interpersonal conflict tactics can be viewed as either direct or indirect and cooperative or competitive. Although some conflict tactics, for example verbal aggression, seem to have uniformly negative results, the effectiveness of other tactics, such as silence, depends on the context. Because the goal of this chapter is simply to introduce conflict, decision making, and power as family processes, we turn to subsequent chapters to provide more detail about how conflict, for example, is played out in specific family contexts.

Part II

**Communication in Family
Subsystems**

5 Courtship and Mate Selection

Anthropologists and evolutionary psychologists argue that human beings are designed to form romantic pair bonds (Fisher, 1992; Schmitt, 2008). A majority of heterosexual and homosexual people alike seek a committed relationship, as well as legal or at least social affirmation of their couplehood (Regan, 2008). The formation of these couple unions triggers the interest of family scholars. Such unions mark the beginning of one's family of orientation and are influenced by experiences in one's family of origin. Cate and Lloyd (1992) name courtship as the "first (and perhaps most crucial) stage in the family life cycle" (p. 2). An assumption inherent in most premarital relationship research is that relationships do not begin on their wedding day. Indeed, a couple's interaction does more to constitute a mate relationship than does the presence of a marriage license.

A major goal in the beginning of this chapter is to examine what draws people together initially and to better understand how these relationships dynamically progress to a deeper level. We use the factors highlighted in ecological models of mate selection (e.g., see Niehuis, Huston, & Rosenband, 2006) as a way to organize the first half of the chapter. We examine (1) individual factors (e.g., individual attributes and preferences), (2) couple factors (e.g., dyadic interaction and commitment), and (3) contextual factors (e.g., socio-cultural networks, distance, or technology) that influence relationship development and the choice of a mate. The modern day challenge for researchers is that people do not always progress into couplehood in "orderly" and "predictable" ways (Surra, Gray, Boettcher, Cottle, & West, 2006, p. 113). An informed review of courtship and mate selection must explore these complexities. To do so, we review multiple models of mate selection and relationship development, some that have garnered recent attention and others with historical relevance. For example, we review stage models, interpersonal process models, ecological models, and evolutionary models. In the last part of the chapter, we examine cohabitation (i.e., living together). In recent decades, there has been a staggering increase in the number of couples who cohabit prior to marriage, cohabit as an alternative to marriage, or cohabit because marriage is not an option (i.e., as in the case of same-sex couples) (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Cate, Levin, & Richmond, 2002; Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; Oswald, Goldberg, Kuvalanka, & Clausell, 2008).

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE COURTSHIP AND MATE SELECTION

Courtship and mate selection are affected by the dynamic interaction of individual, couple, and contextual factors (Cate et al., 2002; Larson & Holman, 1994; Niehuis, et al. 2006). *Individual factors* include individual attributes, personality characteristics, and individual mate preferences. *Couple factors*, or relationship level factors, consider the match between two

partners (i.e., partner complementarity) and couple interaction. *Contextual factors* involve forces outside the relationship, including social-cultural networks and environmental factors such as distance and technology, which impact the relationship.

Individual Factors: Personal Attributes and Characteristics

There are several individual attributes and characteristics that are related to readiness for and success in a serious, intimate relationship. We examine just some of these individual attributes including *age*, *self-beliefs*, *relationship beliefs*, and *past relationship experiences*.

Age

As reported in chapter 1, the average age of first marriage has increased dramatically for both men and women over the last half-century (in 1956, 22.5 years for men and 20.1 years for women; in 2008, 27.4 for men and 25.6 for women). Increases in marriage age are related to a variety of social forces, including increased education for men and especially women, greater societal acceptance of being single, and economic pressures that make it difficult to financially support a marriage, such as costs of a home or children. For example, Hill and Peplau (1998) report that as early as the 1970s, women who sought advanced degrees were less likely to marry their college partner, waiting instead to marry once they completed their advanced degree. For these and other reasons, many people do not feel they are ready to advance a relationship to the level of marriage until they are older. Delay of marriage may have some positive benefits. Teenage marriages are especially prone to divorce (Cate & Lloyd, 1992). It may be that marrying at a later age, when one has more education, life experience, or economic grounding, translates to greater individual maturity and stability, which in turn benefits the interaction of premarital partners (Cate & Lloyd, 1992). Indeed, stated mate preferences change over time. Wood and Brumbaugh (2009) found that as people get older they pay less attention to physical attractiveness, or what the researchers termed “seductive” and “trendy” targets, and more attention to “communal characteristics,” such as sensitivity, intelligence, and conventionality.

Self-Beliefs and Relationship Beliefs

To what extent do self-beliefs, in the form of self-esteem and attachment needs, affect relationship stability? These questions began decades ago, as researchers such as Burgess and Wallin (1953) suggested that individuals who were self-confident before marriage had more successful marriages (Hill & Peplau, 1998). More recently, in a 6-year longitudinal study, Seiffge-Krenke et al. (2001) found that adolescents who experienced a “reliable alliance” with their parents went on to experience more connectedness (i.e., happiness, friendship, trust, and acceptance) as well as more attraction in their adult romantic relationships. The authors concluded that the adolescents might have transferred their attachment security with their parents to their romantic relationships. In a similar vein, Feeney (1999) discovered that males with a dismissing attachment style, or more attachment insecurity, experienced recurrent conflicts as they attempted to manage tensions for togetherness and autonomy in their adult romantic relationships.

In addition to self-beliefs, there is compelling evidence that certain relationship beliefs relate to relationship success. These beliefs include realistic expectations about the work involved in relationships (Demo & Ganong, 1994; Hill & Peplau, 1998), optimistic views or positive illusions that emphasize the strengths of one’s partner and relationship (Murray & Holmes, 1999; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996), and motivation to be in a romantic relationship (Kurdek, 1991).

Past Relationship Experiences

Past relationship experiences, including events and breakups, also contribute to the collection of individual background factors that may affect relationship readiness and future success in an intimate relationship. Some breakups are difficult to shake. Merolla, Weber, Myers, and Booth-Butterfield (2004) assert that “mutual breakups are the most difficult for individuals to overcome when entering a new relationship” (p. 260). They found that when the breakup is mutual, versus breakups attributed to the self or partner, the closeness of the past relationship has a negative bearing on commitment and satisfaction in the new relationship. They further argue that mutual breakups come with less closure. Even though breakups initiated by one’s partner or one’s self are distressing at first, they may seem more final. It is easy to see how having a sense of closure or being able to point to clear reasons why the relationship failed would help a person move on to a new relationship without thinking so much about the past. Along with breakups, certain events in past relationships may also affect readiness and stability in new relationships. In a positive light, past relationship experience may function as a “training school” for what preferences to seek and how to interact in future relationships. People often ask what effect premarital events such as sex and cohabitation have on future relationships. Because these questions are so often motivated by political or moral interests, it is interesting to explore conclusions from social scientists. Teachman (2003) analyzed data from the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth and concluded that in many circumstances, “premarital sex and cohabitation have become part of the normal courtship pattern in the United States . . . and do not provide couples with experiences that lessen the stability of marriage” (p. 453). Because the amount of research on cohabitation and complexity of findings have recently exploded, we reserve a separate section at the end of the chapter for a discussion of cohabitation. As for premarital sex, a closer look at Teachman’s results indicate a slight elevated risk for divorce for women who have had premarital sex or premarital cohabitation with men other than their husbands. The results of Penke and Asendorpf’s (2008) study on the link between socio-sexuality (i.e., willingness to engage in uncommitted sex) and courtship extend the results of Teachman. They found that the more short-term relationships and sexual partners people had in the past, the more instability they had in a future relationship.

Individual Factors: Personal Mate Preferences

What do people say they look for in a long-term mate? Even though stated mate preferences do not necessarily translate to actual mate selection (Eastwick & Finkel 2008), it is informative to examine people’s stated preferences as well as how preferences change over time periods. This is exactly what Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpatrick, and Larson (2001) did in a study that compared 18 different mate preferences of heterosexual men and women across several different time periods (1939, 1967, 1977, 1984/5, and 1996) and across geographically diverse regions of the U.S. (e.g., Texas, California, Massachusetts, Michigan). Although there were a few regional differences, the overwhelming majority of differences occurred not across regions, but across the 57 year time period. Mate preferences for (1) *chastity*, (2) *physical attractiveness*, (3) *financial resources*, (4) *cooking/housekeeping*, and (5) *mutual attraction/love* changed most drastically over time. We discuss each of these preferences individually, and incorporate additional findings.

Chastity

From the early 1900s through the mid 1980s, people gradually began to devalue chastity in a mate. Today, people name several other mate characteristics that are more important to them than chastity. Why was chastity a top mate characteristic in the past? Using an explanation from evolutionary theory, Shakelford and Buss (1997) explain that in ancestral times, men, especially, were concerned about the chastity of their female mates. Ancestral men wanted to

be sure they were investing in offspring to whom they were genetically related. Women's sexual infidelity posed a risk. Further, in many societies, women were also concerned about chastity in their male mates because they wanted to know that the resources of their mate would be fully devoted to them and their children. Valuing chastity has also historically been linked to religious values. Changes in views about chastity in the U.S. may also be linked to changing religious values.

Physical Attractiveness

Over the last half-century, both men and women have gradually viewed physical attractiveness as an increasingly important quality in a mate. In fact, men and women report that physical attractiveness is important, regardless of whether their partner is a short-term or long-term interest. Historically, men have valued physical attractiveness more than women (Shackelford & Buss, 1997). Even today, heterosexual and gay men value physical attractiveness more than heterosexual and lesbian women (Peplau & Beals, 2004). For heterosexual men in Buss et al.'s (2001) study, physical attractiveness rose from the 14th most important characteristic in 1939 to 8th in 1996. For women, it increased from 17th in 1939 to 13th in 1996. Buss et al. note that the cosmetics, diet, and cosmetic surgery industries have capitalized upon and perpetuated this trend.

What makes for physical attractiveness? Some individuals believe that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Although this is sometimes the case, there is actually a great deal of consensus across individuals and across cultures concerning what makes for an attractive mate. Much of the consensus relates to the role of body and facial symmetry (e.g., a straight smile or leg length proportional to body length). Humans across all cultures have been found to rate symmetrical bodies and faces as more attractive than asymmetrical ones.

However there is good news for people who are not symmetrical supermodels. Kowner (2001) contends, "people in reality do not judge facial beauty based only on static features [and whether or not they are symmetrical]. In fact, since prehistoric times, humans have increasingly stressed the role of communication through facial expressions which are often asymmetric" (p. 461). Many studies of physical attractiveness and preferences use a method whereby participants look at several pictures of faces, rate the attractiveness of the faces, and then researchers link things like symmetry to ratings of attractiveness. Such studies are very informative, but they must be interpreted along with other research that shows how interaction with a real-life person influences ratings of physical attractiveness (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Kowner, 2001). Riggio, Widaman, Tucker, and Salinas (1991) argue that physical attractiveness is just one component to attractiveness. They view attractiveness as a multifaceted concept based on facial beauty, body attractiveness, attractiveness of dress, and dynamic expressive style. While facial beauty, body, and dress are usually fixed or static variables that can be measured using a still photograph, one's style of expression is a dynamic variable that involves verbal and nonverbal communication skills and role-playing skills. Riggio et al. (1991) found that among college students, facial beauty and expressive style were the most important components in an individual's overall judgments of another person's attractiveness. Thus, communication, manifested in expressive style, may supersede some physical considerations. Knapp and Vangelisti (2000) remark that "most people have had an experience when someone they thought was only moderately attractive actually became much more attractive to them" (p. 167). It may be more accurate to say that *initial* perceptions of attraction are often based on static physical characteristics, and there is room for these initial perceptions to be modified through interaction.

Financial Resources, Cooking/Housekeeping, and Mutual Attraction/Love

Good financial prospects have become increasingly important to women *and* men. This change is most dramatic for heterosexual men, who in earlier decades had few expectations and

preferences for an economically resourceful mate. It appears, however, that preferences for a partner with earning power interact with age and gender. Sprecher, Sullivan, and Hatfield (1994) found that younger persons (i.e., ages 19–22) were more willing to marry someone who earned less than they did. However, the older women became, the less willing they were to marry a man who earned less than they. Most same-sex couples are in dual earner relationships (Peplau & Beals, 2004), and share or divide household tasks such as cooking and housekeeping equally (Kurdek, 1993). In heterosexual relationships, men place much less value on a partner's cooking and housekeeping skills than they once did. Heterosexual women's preferences for a mate with cooking and housekeeping skills have remained notably low over time, even though many women appear to need more help with cooking and housekeeping now that they are entering the workforce in greater numbers. Finally, mutual attraction and love were not considered primary (i.e., top two) mate selection values until 1967. Today, mutual attraction and love remain at the top of the list of preferences for males and females. This value preference reflects people's desires for their relationships to fulfill psychological needs and desires rather than just practical needs related to raising children and maintaining a household. Overall, individuals' mate selection values have changed over the past half-century, and the mate preferences of men and women have gradually, though not completely, converged.

Limitations to Research on Mate Preferences

We cannot understand the mate selection process simply by studying an individual's preferences. People do not always act on their preferences (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008). Most importantly, relationships depend on the interplay of preferences and values for both individuals. Each partner has to prefer the other, and the circumstances must be right. Houts et al. (1996) explain: "In reality, individuals who are seeking a compatible mate must make many compromises if they are to marry at all" (p.18).

Couple Factors: Partner Compatibility

Compared to individual and contextual factors, couple factors command the most attention from premarital relationship researchers, particularly from those in the field of communication. Most of the attention centers on partner compatibility and the way that interaction affects development and commitment in romantic relationships. Here the concern is not the individual, but the match between two individuals. We begin with a focused look at compatibility.

"It is an axiom of research on interpersonal attraction that similarity leads to liking, and empirical studies demonstrate that intimate relationships tend to be homogenous" (Hill & Peplau, 1998, p. 266). Homogamy refers to individuals who are alike on a characteristic. When individuals pair with mates according to homogamy, they are *assortively matched* (Murstein, 1986). For example, partners who have the same education are said to be assortively matched for education. Assortive matching is concerned with whether individuals are more alike than would be expected by chance. There is evidence that individuals assortively match for external, sociocultural variables such as age, race, education, socioeconomic class, and physical attractiveness. In addition, recent research has explored assortive matching with regard to internal psychosocial variables that are likely to affect the quality of interpersonal interaction. These variables include, for example, role and leisure preferences, communication values, and psychological variables.

Assortive Matching for Sociocultural Variables: Age, Race, Education, Socioeconomic Class, and Physical Attractiveness

Historically, heterosexual couples have assortively matched for *age*, especially in first marriages. But men and women in general are not perfectly assortively matched on age, with men

traditionally being older by a year or two. In the past, this was explained by the fact that fewer women went to college and that men were expected to contribute more economic support to the marriage (Murstein, 1986). Today, more women than men attend college, and women are making more financial contributions to relationships than ever before. Some speculate that this age gap for first marriages may decrease in the next century.

Individuals report more acceptance of interracial marriage than ever before, and rates of intermarriage are increasing. In 1960, fewer than 4 in 1,000 U.S. marriages were interracial relationships (Crowder & Tolnay, 2000). By 2000, 5 in 100 marriages were classified by the U.S. Census Bureau as interracial (Lee & Edmonston, 2005). Even with these increases, assortive matching for *race* is still relatively strong. Overall, Asian American-Anglo and Latino-Anglo pairings lead the way in interracial marriage (Gaines & Brennan, 2001). By group, American Indians, Hawaiians, and multiple race people have the highest percentages of intermarriage rates (Lee & Edmonston, 2005).

Historically, and still today, assortive matching by *education* and *socioeconomic class* is common (Cherlin, 2010; Murstein, 1986). People may not consciously look for mates of similar education and socioeconomic class, but society is organized so that people of similar class are more likely to come into contact with each other (Houts et al., 1996). For example, people who attend college effectively place themselves in a pool of other college students, most of whom have similar goals for attaining a college degree and at least share the socioeconomic means to enter college. Tuition and entrance requirements at some elite universities virtually ensure homogamy of socioeconomic class. Cherlin (2010) remarks that “college graduates have largely separated themselves from the rest of the marriage market” (p. 404).

There is even some evidence that couples assortively match for *physical attractiveness*. Walster (1966) first found support for this phenomenon, terming it the *matching hypothesis*. The matching hypothesis proposes that people of similar levels of attractiveness will pair with one another, and it is still at work in this era (Montoya, 2008). The matching hypothesis illustrates how stated mate preferences may not perfectly correspond with actual mating. That is, many people say they would prefer to have a highly attractive mate, but most end up with someone of a similar level of attractiveness as themselves. According to the matching hypothesis, an average looking woman would set herself up for constant rejection if she repeatedly asked out only highly attractive men. Highly attractive men, who are likely being courted by other highly attractive women, would choose the attractive prospects over the non-attractive prospects who have less “mate value” (Shakelford & Buss, 1997). Likewise, some low- to average-looking people devalue physical attractiveness and prefer to be with other low/average-looking people because they feel they will not have to engage in excessive “mate-guarding” to keep their highly attractive mate away from other desiring people (Jonason, 2009; Shakelford & Buss, 1997). McNulty, Neff, and Karney (2008) discovered that in cases where married partners are not matched for physical attractiveness, partners behave more positively when the female is more attractive than the male as opposed to a highly attractive male with a less attractive female. McNulty et al. linked their findings to evolutionary theories, which suggest that highly attractive men have more opportunities for short-term mating, in the form of extra-marital affairs.

However, physical attractiveness is not the only thing that gives people mate value. Sometimes people exchange their financial value, education level, social skills, or personality for another’s physical attractiveness (e.g., a physically unattractive but rich man matched with a highly physically attractive woman) (Carmalt, 2008; Wenzel, 2009). Furthermore, Knapp and Vangelisti (2000) explain that a high self-esteem gives a person (1) the perception that he/she has high mate value, (2) the motivation to seek out a mate who has high value, perhaps even higher actual value, and (3) the “tough skin” to deal with rejection from a potential partner. In sum, who we date is often a reflection of our own level of attractiveness or other valuable qualities that can substitute for our attractiveness.

Assortive Matching for Psychosocial Variables: Role and Leisure Preferences, Communication Values, and Psychological Qualities

Houts et al. (1996) argue that how individuals match up with regard to internal, psychosocial variables is important, because these are the variables that so acutely affect interaction and relationship quality, more so than sociocultural variables like race and age. Toward this end, Houts et al. found evidence that the 168 couples in their study assortively matched for *leisure interests* and *role preferences*. As for leisure preferences, people tended to pair with partners who had similar leisure pursuits related to sports, exercise, culture, outings, relaxation, television, and partying. In addition, the husbands who indicated the greatest feelings of love and the most relationship maintenance behaviors were those who had more similar leisure interests with their wives. As for role preferences, people tended to pair with partners who had similar role preferences related to housekeeping, repairs and outdoor maintenance, food preparation, financial tasks, and shopping. Similarity in role preferences was defined as agreement on who should complete certain tasks: the husband, wife, or both. Couples who were less similar in their role preferences reported more conflict and negativity in their marriage.

In 1994, Burleson, Kunkel, and Birch studied the extent to which romantic partners had similar values about *communication* and if similar values enhanced attraction and satisfaction in the relationship. Similar to the Houts et al. study, Burleson et al.'s (1994) study followed the premise that satisfying romantic relationships are based on whether the partners have enjoyable interactions and a good time together. They essentially explored whether similar communication values led to the kind of enjoyable interactions that would benefit a relationship. In general, Burleson et al. found that romantic partners were not assortively matched for communication values. However, the more similar partners were in the way they valued affectively oriented communication skills, the more partner attraction and relationship satisfaction those partners experienced. Burleson et al. concluded that people do not appear to choose partners based on similar communication values, but the more similar partners' communication values are, the more attraction and satisfaction they experience.

With regard to *psychological qualities*, it appears that people seek out others who are similar to the self even on seemingly less desirable psychological qualities. For example, people select interpersonal partners with similar psychiatric conditions as themselves (du Fort, Kovess, & Bolvin, 1994; Merikangas, Weissman, Prusoff, & John, 1988; Merikangas & Spiker, 1982), including depression (Merikangas, 1984; Rosenblatt & Greenberg, 1991). Sophisticated studies of depression that establish a family history of depression in married couples and their 1st-degree relatives (e.g., Merikangas & Spiker, 1982; Merikangas et al., 1988) provide compelling evidence for the assortive matching hypothesis. Ordinarily, some may be inclined to view similar symptoms of depression in husbands and their wives as evidence of emotional transmission from one spouse to the other through repeated interactions. However, evidence of a family history of depression in each spouse points to the conclusion that the spouses were most likely "matched" on symptoms of depression from the start of their relationship. Because similarity is such a powerful force in interpersonal attraction (Byrne, 1971; Newcomb, 1961), it is reasonable to assume that the assortive matching effect permeates the formation of most close relationships—even on such undesirable qualities as psychological distress (Merikangas, 1984; Segrin, 2004).

Does Similarity Really Breed Attraction?

Similarity has long been assumed to produce attraction and satisfaction in both opposite-sex and same-sex romantic relationships (Peplau & Beals, 2004). Even though there is widespread support that similarity leads to compatibility, the relationship is really more complex. It is important to explore where these complexities lie.

By far the most attention and controversy surrounds the relationship between *attitude* similarity and attraction. Byrne's (1969) *reinforcement affect model* of attraction suggests that people are attracted to others who view the world in the same way as they do because it validates their views. One challenge offered by Sunnafrank and his colleagues (Sunnafrank, 1985, 1986, 1992; Sunnafrank & Miller, 1981) is that communication moderates the effect that attitude similarity has on attraction. This argument maintains that attitude dissimilarity can be an aversive force in new relationships and can even keep two people from achieving an opportunity to interact (Ah Yun, 2002, p. 148). However, if given the opportunity to interact, the communication is often pleasant, and, over time, communication can help overcome some of the differences. After a brief initial interaction, similar people do not like each other any more than dissimilar people (Sunnafrank & Miller, 1981).

A second challenge to the attitude similarity and attraction axiom is the *repulsion hypothesis* (Rosenbaum, 1986). "According to the repulsion hypothesis, attitude similarity does not heighten interpersonal attraction, because similarity is expected. However the discovery of attitude *dissimilarity* is unexpected and aversive, resulting in interpersonal repulsiveness that decreases interpersonal attractiveness" (Ah Yun, 2002, p. 148). Thus, attitude similarity does not increase attraction, but attitude dissimilarity decreases attraction.

A third challenge is the idea that some people desire a partner who has different strengths that are complementary as well as different weaknesses so as not to compound problems. Markey (2007) reconfirmed a common notion in relationship research: romantic couples with the highest relationship quality are those who are similar in warmth, but opposite in dominance. Being opposite in dominance means that the partners in these relationships are not both trying to run the show at the same time on every topic. Matching up with a partner who has different interests may also lead to self-expansion. Aron and Aron's model of self-expansion (1986, 1997) proposes that people desire to expand themselves through the course of a relationship. Self-expansion is enhanced by participation in novel activities that reduce boredom. A partner who is dissimilar may promote activities that are novel and arousing to the other throughout the course of the relationship. What makes the study of similarity and attraction so difficult is that there are so many types of similarities and differences to consider. There is also a difference between perceived similarity and actual similarity. In addition, partners can grow to become more similar or different over the course of a relationship.

Couple Factors: Partner Interaction

It is the communication, both verbal and nonverbal, of dating partners that constitutes their relationship. Communication dynamically affects the course of romantic relationships and decisions about relationship commitment (Rogers, 2001). Knapp (1978, 1984; Knapp & Vangelisti, 2000) highlighted the scripts that characterize stages of meeting and coming together in a dating relationship (Table 5.1). Subsequently, Welch and Rubin (2002) developed descriptions of the relationship stages (also in Table 5.1) associated with these scripts. These labels and stage descriptions are useful for understanding typical interactions of romantic couples, but couples do not necessarily progress through these stages in the same way. Some relationships have significant tension and instability in their development (Knobloch, 2007). A chief contribution of the relationship stages research is the discovery of common communication scripts in romantic relationships. Much of the communication in initial interaction is highly scripted, particularly in the case of introductions and small talk (Kellermann, 1995). We use Knapp's relationship stages as a means of further organizing the discussion of how verbal and nonverbal communication affects the course of relationship development and commitment.

Initiating and Experimenting Stages: Flirting, Dating, and Reducing Uncertainty

During the *initiating* and *experimenting* stages, or the getting-to-know-you stages, nonverbal cues are powerful, perhaps even more powerful than verbal cues. In 1985, Moore cataloged a

Table 5.1 Relationship stages, representative scripts, and relationship stage descriptions

| <i>Stage</i> | <i>Representative Scripts</i> | <i>Relationship Stage Descriptions</i> |
|---------------|--|---|
| Initiating | “Hi how ya doin’?” “Fine. You?” | We’ve recently met (or I’d to meet this person). As I scan him/her I am deciding whether he/she is “attractive” or “unattractive” and deciding whether to initiate communication. I am thinking: “I see you, I am friendly, and I want to open channels for communication to take place.” |
| Experimenting | “Oh, so you like to ski... so do I.” “You do? Great. Where do you go?” | We are beginning the process of experimenting—trying to discover the unknown. We exchange demographic information and our conversation often seems controlled by a norm that says “if you tell me your hometown, I’ll tell you mine.” Small talk is the key means of communicating here. This relationship is generally pleasant, relaxed, uncritical, casual, and full of questions. |
| Intensifying | “I...think I love you.” “I love you too.” | We have a good amount of personal closure, and we have begun to get a glimpse of some previously withheld secrets. We disclose about a lot of things, and often about how our relationship is developing. We have begun to speak more informally. We say “we,” and express our commitment directly (such as saying “I really like you” or “We work well together.”) As we begin to get close, we do so with caution, waiting for confirmation before proceeding. |
| Bonding | “I feel so much a part of you.” “Yeah, we are like one person. What happens to you happens to me.” “I want to be with you always.” “Let’s get married.” | Our two individual personalities are almost fused or blended. Our verbal and nonverbal communication shows that we are alike. We dress alike, have the same interests, and people begin to treat us as a “couple.” When they invite us places, they invite us both. We’re as close as family members often are. In a public ritual, we have announced to the world that a commitment has been formally contracted. It is during this stage that we become engaged, get married, go into business together, or move in together. Communication is at its highest level and often we don’t even have to talk because we know each other so well. Our families and friends are blended. |

Note. From Knapp, M.L., & Vangelisti, A.L. (2000). *Interpersonal Communication and Human Relationships 4/e* Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon. Copyright © by Pearson Education. Also from Welch, S.A., and Rubin, R.B. (2002) “Development of Relationship Stage Measures,” *Communication Quarterly*, 50, 24–40. Copyright 2002 by Eastern Communication Association. Adapted with permission.

variety of nonverbal courtship or flirting behaviors, including glancing, leaning forward, smiling, nodding, touch, hair flip/head toss, object caress (e.g., touching the edge of a glass), laugh, and lip lick. Moore (1998) also documented how refusal or disinterest in a partner is indicated nonverbally, for example, by looking away, turning away, frowning, and yawning. More recently, Moore (2002) found that men and women decode nonverbal courtship behaviors differently. For example, men rate refusal behaviors as less negative than women. Men also rate flirting behaviors as more positive than women, or as communicating stronger positive intent toward the relationship. Moore provides a fascinating evolutionary psychology framework to explain the difference in male’s and female’s perceptions of flirting. She suggests that because women bear children, they have a lot more investment in romantic relationships. Thus they benefit from making careful and sometimes timely decisions about a mate in order to find someone who will help support their investment. With theoretically less investment,

men want to more quickly take advantage of sexual opportunities. Thus, Moore explains: “Using subtle behaviors to signal interest may allow women to stall decision making leading to greater intimacy until they have had time to assess adequately partners’ qualifications. For a man being prepared to see interest on the part of a potential partner but also pressing for attention even when lacking is adaptive” (p. 104).

Introductions, small talk, and flirting may lead to going on a date. Mongeau, Jacobson, and Donnerstein (2007) define dates in behavioral and cognitive terms. Behaviorally, a date involves engaging with a partner in an activity in public (e.g., going to a movie, going to dinner). What makes these activities a “date” and not just dinner with a friend is the way one cognitively views the event, in terms of expectations, goals, and emotions (Mongeau et al., p. 537). On a date, the overall goal is to explore a romantic relationship. People also report more specific goals for dates, such as reducing uncertainty (i.e., getting to know the other person) and having fun (Mongeau et al.). People find out valuable information on first dates. Participants in Aron, Dutton, Aron, and Iverson’s (1989) study reported that the two most common predecessors to falling in love included (1) discovering another person likes you, and (2) discovering desirable characteristics in another. The interaction that occurs in early dating is a means by which partners confirm desirable characteristics and confirm reciprocal liking (i.e., when they find out that the other person is also interested in a romantic relationship). Other research by Mongeau on the early stages of romantic relationships demonstrates that males and females differ in their sexual attitudes and sexual expectations in early dating stages (Mongeau & Carey, 1996). Males have more heightened sexual expectations, especially when the female initiates the date.

Intensifying and Integrating Stages: Expressing Commitment and Dealing With Conflict

Partners meet and get to know each other, but soon the voluntary nature of romantic relationships prompts partners to think about how committed they are to the relationship and whether it is one they want to continue (i.e., the intensifying stage). Solomon and Knobloch’s (2004) relational turbulence model is devoted to understanding the turmoil that partners experience as they transition from casual dating to serious involvement. With so much existing research attending to initial attraction or cohabitation and marriage, the relational turbulence model is important in part because it illustrates how critical the middle stages of romantic relationship development are. Relational turbulence is defined as “people’s tendency to be cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally reactive to relationship circumstances” (Knobloch, 2007, p. 365).

What causes reactivity or turbulence? The model highlights relational uncertainty and relational interference. *Relational uncertainty* refers to how much confidence people have in their own involvement, their partner’s involvement, or the viability of the relationship as whole (Theiss, Knobloch, Checton, & Magsamen-Conrad, 2009, p. 589). As intimacy increases to moderate levels, partners have a lot to adjust to and negotiate in the relationship. In casual dating, communication scripts help provide an avenue for dealing with uncertainty, and in serious relationships partners are more secure in their relationships (Knobloch, 2007). But middle stages can be characterized by significant questioning about the nature of the relationship. For example, as Arriaga, Reed, Goodfriend, and Agnew (2006) found, when people perceive that their partner’s level of commitment fluctuates over time, they are faced with doubt about their partner and the state of the relationship—a doubt that is strongly related to relationship dissolution in dating relationships. *Relational interference* refers to disruptions to everyday activities that stem from becoming more interdependent in a relationship. As relationships become more interdependent, partners attempt to coordinate activities and routines, and try to cooperate to achieve goals. This does not always go smoothly. Knobloch (2007) points out that problems of relational interference are not as acute at other levels of intimacy.

In casual dating, partners still act as individuals. As the relationship increases in intimacy, partners realize that weekend plans, for example, are not just about their own agendas, their own leisure pursuits, seeing their own friends or family, but these activities must be coordinated with those of a partner. In serious relationships, partners have often figured out a means for coordinating their activities. The relational turbulence model explains that negative emotions such as anger, sadness, fear, and jealousy are higher at moderate levels of intimacy in dating relationships, as compared to low and high levels of intimacy (Knobloch, Miller, & Carpenter, 2007). Relationships with more relational uncertainty and partner interference have more experiences of hurt, as well as greater intensity and relational damage felt by the hurtful messages (Theiss & Knobloch, 2009).

The relational turbulence model illustrates that as partners choose to intensify their relationship, they become increasingly interdependent, a trademark of the *integrating* stage. Greater interdependence translates to more opportunities for conflict. Siegart and Stamp (1994) provide an interesting analysis of conflict in dating relationships by studying how romantic partners handle the “first big fight” in their relationship. They make three conclusions about how romantic couples handle their first big fight. First, fights, especially the “big” fights they studied, can both reduce uncertainty and increase uncertainty. After some fights, couples understand each other better as well as reasons behind their partner’s actions. Yet other fights increase uncertainty by leaving partners with questions about the relationship and decisions about how to handle information that is revealed. Second, fights often test relationship commitment. Partners must decide how hard they want to work to overcome fights and how much conflictive issues will get in the way of commitment. Third, partners’ communication distinguishes those premarital relationships that survive the first big fight from those that do not. Survivors engage in joint problem solving, and both partners have the ability and willingness to make some sacrifices and adjustments in behavior. The motivation to resolve conflicts in dating relationships, through the use of positive resources such as open discussion and concern for the partner, appears to be directly related to strong intimacy and commitment. Another study by Stets (1993) on conflict in developing relationships concurs, and adds that perspective-taking is a crucial skill in new relationships. Because the tendency for conflict also increases with relationship seriousness, perspective-taking abilities must also increase.

Scholars are learning that interaction patterns during relationship courtship have a significant impact on later marital outcomes. Many laypersons believe that the interaction in a relationship changes once the relationship is legally bonded (e.g., marriage); however, this appears not to be the case. Some time ago, Kelly et al. (1985) found that conflict during courtship was a very good indicator of conflict and dissatisfaction in the marriage. There is also a *sleepers effect* such that the effect of conflict during courtship sometimes does not show up until later (Notarius, 1996). Even serious conflict during courtship does not always affect a couple’s satisfaction with their relationship at the time, but it may predict dissatisfaction with the partner and the marriage up to five years later (Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanely, & Clements, 1993). For these reasons, the study of premarital communication is an important complement to studies on marital relations (Flora & Segrin, 2003; Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

Bonding Stage: Decisions to Formalize the Union

The bonding stage is exhibited when couples declare to each other and their social network that they want to marry or legalize their union. How do people decide to formalize a union? Some make this decision very consciously, after extending every effort to get to know a partner’s strengths and weaknesses. This strategy is at the heart of the Enduring Dynamics Model (Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001; see chapter 11). The idea is that if you fully understand your partner’s strengths and weaknesses when you enter marriage, then

you will be familiar with the relationship dynamics that must be endured later in marriage. Many relationship education programs, like the Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge (PICK) program, try to help people think rationally about a partner's strengths, weaknesses, background, and their compatibility, rather than exclusively following emotions (Van Epp, Futris, Van Epp, & Campbell, 2008). No partner is perfect, but it is informative to think ahead about how and to what extent one will compromise. Another way people transition into a formal union is explained by the Disillusionment Model (Huston et al., 2001). Charmed by the idealization of a loving, affectionate relationship that is devoid of negative emotions and behaviors, partners enter into marriage with little awareness of problems. These partners, who were putting on their best face while dating, then become disillusioned when realities and problems come to the surface after marriage.

More recently, Oswald et al. (2008) examined how and why same-sex couples decide to formalize their union, either by establishing legal ties or holding a commitment ceremony. Legal ties are a way of establishing structural commitment (i.e., external or economic barriers to exiting a relationship), and a commitment ceremony is a way of establishing moral commitment (i.e., religious or moral obligation to remain in a relationship) (see chapter 6 for a discussion of commitment). The longer lesbians and gay men had cohabitated with their partners, the more likely they were to establish legal ties. Among people with legalized same-sex unions, commitment ceremonies were more common among those who were parents (vs. non parents) and those who were more religious. For same-sex couples, the ability to initiate a legalized union, a marriage, or a religious commitment ceremony is largely dependent on the presence of legal and religious avenues or barriers. So it is apt to move on to a discussion of how the macro environment shapes courtship and mate selection.

Contextual Factors

In addition to individual and couple factors, contextual factors influence mate choice. Contextual factors include socio-cultural networks, as well as environmental contexts such as proximity, long-distance dating, or online dating that impact relationship commitment.

Socio-cultural Networks

In some societies, social networks (friends and family) are highly involved in the selection of a mate. In the United States, the vast majority of marriages and unions involve people who self-select one another. To what extent can social networks damage or enhance relationship development? What difference does it make if your parents or friends do not like the person you are dating? Most evidence indicates that interference or disapproval negatively affects the relationship and support enhances the relationship (Klein & Milardo, 2000; Schmeekle & Sprecher, 2004; Surra, 1990). There is little support for the *Romeo and Juliet effect* (i.e., the idea that couples become stronger in spite of interference) (Sprecher & Feilmlee, 1992). It appears, however, that specific actions that are supportive or interfering are not as influential as are the *perceived subjective* reactions of other people (e.g., "What will other people think of me if I date this person?"). In other words, people are more concerned about what others will think (i.e., their general disapproval or encouragement) versus what they do (Parks & Eggert, 1991; Sprecher & Feilmlee, 1992).

Daters also carefully observe how their partners interact with their network (e.g., "Do they get along with my family?"). Social network members sometimes even indirectly socialize dating partners (e.g., your new boyfriend observes the way other couples in your family network behave, and he infers your family's expectations for your relationship). If third parties decide to interfere with a romantic relationship, they most commonly do so in the middle stages of the relationship (Knobloch & Donovan-Kicken, 2006). The premise is that

interference in the beginning stages may not be necessary. Why bother because the relationship may never progress to a serious level anyway? Interference at the latest stages, for example after engagement, is also less common. At this stage, interference could alienate the couple from the network and damage chances for any type of relationship in the future (Surra, 1990). In general, (1) network support enhances relationship progress and interference hampers it, and (2) interference tends to occur in the middle stages of a relationship.

Some same-sex romantic relationships do not have the kind of legal and societal support that opposite-sex romantic relationships have. Further, people in same-sex relationships may find that family and friends whom they expected to support the relationship do not offer backing. Oswald (2002) describes the active and resourceful ways that same-sex partners work to intentionally build a supportive social network, even early in their relationship development. For example, same-sex partners often make intentional choices about who to define or redefine as family. In doing so, they may choose to define supportive friends as family, turning to these friends in holiday celebrations, for care during illness, for shared resources, and even for support when the romantic relationship is not going well (Oswald, 2002).

Environmental Contexts: Proximity

In 1968, Eckland proposed that our chances are about 50-50 “that the ‘one and only’ lives within walking distance” (p. 16). Proximity may have more to do with mate selection than the romantic notion that there is one destined match among the millions of available partners. Glick (1988) popularized the term “marital squeeze” to refer to situations where there is a lack of proximal or available marriage partners. Glick originally used the term to refer to an over supply of women in decades prior to the 1980s (Surra, 1990). The marital squeeze meant that women had to compete for a fewer number of available male partners, and some women were forced to remain single. However, after the 1980s, men began to experience more of a marital squeeze (Surra, 1990). An exception, however, is for African American women who still are faced with an undersupply of African American men, that is, if being assortively matched for race is considered important (Crowder & Tolnay, 2000; Holland, 2009; Surra, Gray, Cottle, & Boettcher, 2004).

In the 1970s, a group of researchers (Pennebaker et al., 1979) tested whether there was any empirical evidence to support the notion that people are willing to compromise their standards for a partner when there are few available choices. They literally put the title of Mickey Gilley’s country western song *Don’t the Girls Get Prettier at Closing Time* to the test. They found that both men and women rated patrons of several bars as more attractive when the bar neared closing time as compared to earlier in the evening. Although they did not control for the effects of alcohol, it may be that people are more willing to compromise their choices when they feel a “squeeze” of partners. They may simply be reacting to the anxiety of being alone.

Environmental Contexts: Long-distance Dating

With increased mobility through travel and new technologies for communicating across distance, a larger percentage of people are in long-distance dating relationships (LDDRs) than ever before. Between 25–50% of university students’ dating relationships are estimated to be long distance (Cameron & Ross, 2007; Maguire, 2007; Stafford & Reske, 1990). Partners in LDDRs face unique stressors and challenges compared to geographically close relationships. But at the same time, some LDDRs foster unique mechanisms for relationship resiliency that prove effective even when partners are reunited.

A prime question in research on LDDRs is how the people in these relationships deal with uncertainty—particularly uncertainty about when they will be able to communicate and when they will be reunited. In Maguire’s (2007) study of LDDRs, participants who were more

certain about living in the same city with their partners at some point in the future were more satisfied, less distressed, and found communication coping strategies more helpful, especially if they were satisfied with the possibility of living together. As Maguire points out, not all LDDRs are similar. Some people like the distance they have in their relationships. Other people live far away from each other but still manage to maintain a high degree of face to face contact and communication in spite of the distance.

Sahlstein (2006) applied the Relational Dialectics perspective to explain how people cope with uncertainty in the context of LDDRs. Managing certainty and uncertainty is a common dialectical tension in relationships. While certainty can bring feelings of security, stability, and make planning easier, some kinds of uncertainty make relationships exciting. In earlier research by Sahlstein (1996, 2004), long distance partners expressed desires to know that they could interact with their partners at consistent times or in fixed manners, but they also longed for the freedom to act spontaneously (e.g., to go out on a date without prior planning or travel). To deal with the tension over certainty and uncertainty, Sahlstein (2006) discovered that partners used three primary praxis strategies related to planning. One strategy involved making plans as a form of *denial*. For those who were frustrated with the tensions involved in being apart, instead of fixating on these frustrations, they planned for and focused on their future time together. In a second strategy, *balance*, partners scheduled some time to discuss serious topics or events of the day, and left some interaction time for spontaneous activities and natural interaction. Third, partners used *segmentation* when it came to dealing with time apart. When they could be together, partners planned for “couple time,” but when they could not be together they focused on their own goals, careers, and other personal relationships.

Another major question in LDDRs is how partners transition into living in close geographic proximity. Some couples struggle because they miss their autonomy, have trouble managing time and interdependent activities, or realize that the relationships and partners they have been idealizing at a distance have faults that are more evident now that they see each other more often (Stafford, Merolla, & Castle, 2006). Indeed, people in LDDRs romantically idealize their romantic relationships more than people in geographically close relationships (Stafford & Merolla, 2007). They seem to do this largely as a means of keeping the relationship alive in their minds. Couples who engaged in extreme idealization and also had less face-to-face contact while geographically distant were more likely to break up when they became geographically close (Stafford & Merolla, 2007).

It is worth pointing out that some of the mechanisms partners employ to deal with being apart serve them well once reunited. Some degree of idealization is useful for romantic partners (Stafford & Merolla, 2007) because it helps develop a cognitive perspective that is positive and forgiving. In addition, partners who dealt with long-distance uncertainty by managing time and setting aside special time to talk about serious topics or events of the day might do well to carry this routine into their long-term relationships as a means of staying in touch with each other (Mietzner & Lin, 2005). Finally, maintaining focus on one’s own goals, relationships, or career might serve a partner well when some segmentation of family life from professional or other social contexts is called upon.

Environmental Contexts: Online Dating

The phenomenon of online dating has exploded. Prior to 2000 only a handful of scholarly, peer-reviewed journal articles dealt specifically with online dating. A majority of Americans now view online dating as a legitimate way to find a partner (Houran, Lange, Rentfro, & Bruckner, 2004). Around 25% of singles in the U.S. are estimated to have used an online dating service (Houran et al., 2004; Miley, 2009; Rosen, Cheever, Cummings, & Felt, 2008; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). It is not just tech savvy young adults who are turning to online dating. There is some evidence that involvement in online dating increases as people advance to middle age, and that people over 60 are joining the online dating trend

(Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009; Stephure, Boon, MacKinnon, & Deveau, 2009). Online dating is especially appealing to people who feel their marriage/dating markets are diminished because of relocation (or continued location in rural areas), retirement, and divorce, or to people who are crunched for time to date the traditional way because of work or single parenting demands (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009; Rosen, 2004). There are even online dating services to meet the needs of specific populations (e.g., Christian singles, gay men, millionaires). As a part of a 2008 settlement in response to a discrimination suit filed by a man in New Jersey, eHarmony Inc. now has a dating service, CompatiblePartners.net, targeted toward gays and lesbians (Koppel & Ovide, 2008; Contemporary Sexuality, 2009).

Using someone else's help to find a match is not a new idea, as evidenced by the history of arranged marriages. But online dating services have made the use of technology to find a mate a major business. Access fees for eHarmony and Match range from \$20–\$60 a month, and online dating revenues account for around 1% of all online transactions, making the online dating industry a billion dollar industry (Miley, 2009; Rosen et al., 2007). Some criticisms of online dating services target money-making motivations. Many online dating sites market “scientific” compatibility testing and matching systems that some feel give users the illusion that they are assured of finding a soul mate. Rosen says, “What is emerging on the Internet is a glorification of scientific and technological solutions to the challenge of finding love” (2004, p. 51). Houran et al. (2004) follow with the charge that consumers should be skeptical of the life-changing decisions they make based on the “scientific” tests and matching systems of dating services, because the quality of a dating service may only as good as the quality of its tests.

Most research on communication during online dating focuses on (1) how impressions and identities are managed online, (2) how specific online communication behaviors (e.g., self-disclosure, emotionality, and relationships maintenance behaviors) occur and the effect they have, and (3) how couples vary in their dependence and use of online communication. To begin, in most online dating sites, initial impressions are managed through profiles posted by participants. The profiles often include a photograph, demographic information (e.g., age, weight, education level, geographic location, income, etc.), and a few short paragraphs of self-description (Rosen et al., 2007). Some sites also offer compatibility scores based on stated partner preferences. Profiles that contain photos, versus those without, are more likely to be viewed, especially in the case of men viewing women's photos (Rosen et al., 2008). Online photos are an important part of impression management—so important that independent judges in Hancock and Toma's (2009) research rated around one-third of photos as “not accurate.” These same researchers also found females' photographs to be less accurate than males' often because of professional retouching or the use of photos from younger years. Just like altered photographs, self-descriptive paragraphs are sometimes a combination of one's actual self and a hoped-for possible self (Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, & McCabe, 2005). The written profile can be a means of recreating one's identity. People report a motivation to use dating services after times of transition, such as moving to a new city or reorienting oneself after divorce, and this may be because identity re-creation is especially appealing in those situations (Yurchisin et al., 2005). For sure, many online daters grapple with how much to “stretch the truth,” especially if the ultimate goal is to meet up with one's match in person at some point and develop an honest, genuine relationship (Hardey, 2004).

How do people communicate online and what effect does this communication have? Online dating often occurs at an accelerated pace, with “a flurry” of e-mail messages, compared to traditional dating where partners begin with once-a-week dates (Rosen et al., 2007, p. 2124). The first e-mail messages that participants exchange are critical, because people use the content of the messages to screen potential partners. In those first e-mails, participants in Rosen et al.'s study preferred low self-disclosure, but valued words that carried high emotionality. For example, people preferred descriptions of interests and experiences that contained high emotion words such as “exciting” and “wonderful” versus less charged words such as

“fine” or “happy” (Rosen, 2004, p. 2124). Like people in offline romantic relationships, online daters value gradually getting to know partners as a means of establishing trust (Hardey, 2004). The difference is that when a relationship exists exclusively online, daters can put the brakes on a relationship more easily and abruptly by blocking e-mails, not responding, and cashing in on any anonymity they have maintained.

Many people want to know a lot about a person, and even feel some basic trust, before they meet in person. This is the very thing that can make meeting in person awkward—you are seeing someone that you know only so much about for the first time. This awkwardness does not stop people, because daters long for the increased intimacy that only being face to face can bring. People who solely relate online report significantly less intimacy than those in face-to-face relationships (Scott, Mottarella, & Lavooy, 2006).

Not all online dating relationships are alike. Rabby (2007, p. 318) classified the participants in his study into relationship types according to how they first met and how they now meet. “Virtuals” first met online and still meet online. “Pinocchios” first met online and now meet offline. “Real Worlders” first met offline and still meet offline. Finally, “Cyber Emigrants” first met offline, but now meet online. More than online/offline relationship type, the commitment level of these participants was the best predictor of the kinds of relationship maintenance behaviors (e.g., positivity, openness, assurances) they used to sustain their relationship.

MODELS OF MATE SELECTION

We now turn to models of mate selection, some of recent attention and others of historical relevance. We begin by reviewing early stage models, which have more recently been supplanted by interpersonal process models, ecological models, and evolutionary models.

Stage Models

Prior to stage models of courtship, researchers purported that one feature or one single dimension, for example attitude similarity, physical attractiveness, or need fulfillment, motivated mate selection decisions. Duck (1998) calls these early models “switch on” models. If the one feature is satisfied in a potential partner, then the relationship is a “go.” Many of these early models were not very successful at predicting eventual mate selection or relationship success. Initial attraction, for example, is a very poor predictor of the eventual “success” of a marriage. However, these early models provided the framework for later, more complex stage models.

Winch’s Complementary Needs Model

One early and historically important model is the *complementary needs model* developed by sociologist Robert Winch (Winch, 1958). Winch argued that homogamy of social characteristics is a strong influence on marital choice, but only for preliminary screening to determine a field of eligible spouses. Past the preliminary screening, partners seek out people who are different so as to fulfill complementary needs. Two needs are complementary if the process of satisfying partner A’s needs also satisfies the needs of partner B. For example, partner A enjoys being submissive, and partner B enjoys being dominant. Or, partner A likes to work on the car, and partner B needs someone to keep the car in good running condition. Despite its initial appeal, most researchers other than Winch have failed to find empirical support for the theory (Cate, 1992). In his explanation for the lack of support for Winch’s theory, Murstein (1986) argues that people are not always aware of their needs. Even if they are, they do not always select mates based on those needs. There is also evidence that people’s ideal partners are often more like their ideal selves, rather than someone who is different (Murstein, 1986).

Murstein's Stimulus-Value-Role Model

Researchers soon surmised that people progress toward long-term commitments by filtering *various* pieces of information concerning compatibility, not just one. Further, people filter different kinds of information at various stages in the relationship. Earlier in the chapter, we discussed one example of a stage model, Knapp's progression of relationship stages on the path toward marriage. Another popular stage model is Murstein's Stimulus-Value-Role (SVR) model (Figure 5.1).

SVR is an exchange theory (see chapter 4) suggesting that in a free choice situation, attraction and interaction depend on the exchange of assets and liabilities that each partner brings to the relationship. Assets are commodities (i.e., behaviors and qualities) the individual possesses that are capable of rewarding another. Liabilities are behaviors or qualities associated with an individual that are costly to others. The variables that can influence the course of development of the relationship can be classified under three categories: stimulus, value comparison, and role.

Upon first contact, people are in the *stimulus stage*. Here, people form first impressions based on physical appearance, status, poise, or other readily available information involving career, reputation, and professional aspirations. This stage is crucial because if one person does not possess sufficient stimuli or assets to attract the other, no further contact will be sought. In the *value comparison* stage, approximately contacts 2-7 in Murstein's initial research, the partners focus on attitudes, beliefs, needs, and desires. Stimulus issues are still of concern, however value comparisons take center stage. Partners gather information through verbal interaction, saving the most intimate, controversial values until the later contacts. If couples have survived the stimulus and value stages, they have established a reasonably good relationship.

The primary focus, in contacts 8 and beyond, turns to whether partners can function in compatible roles. A primary feature of the *role stage* is evaluating whether the course of one

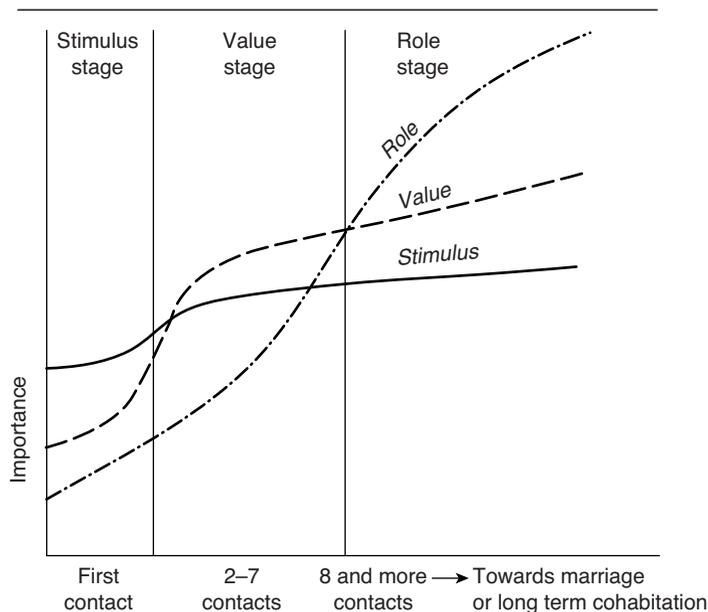


Figure 5.1 SVR model

Note. From B.I. Murstein, *Paths to Marriage*, p. 135, copyright © 1986 by Sage. Reprinted with permission of Sage Publications, Inc.

partner's roles fits with respect to the other partner's roles. For example, if partner A sees herself going on to medical school and practicing medicine in an underdeveloped nation, will partner B be able to achieve his role desires in that location? Murstein suggests that successfully completing each stage prepares a couple for marriage, although some couples continue to work on the factors related to these stages throughout a marriage, and many couples do marry without experiencing each stage.

Murstein has found support for his theory (1986), although the theory has not been well-supported by others. The theory has also been critiqued on the grounds that some of the stage boundaries seem arbitrary or have little theoretical justification (Cate, 1992). For example, some couples may consider roles before values or along with values. Furthermore, the timing of each stage may vary by couple. Still, SVR is one of the most well-developed stage models. A major contribution of the model is that it alerts people to the impact of the possible roles people might find themselves in with their partner, rather than just looking at stimulus and value issues. Even recent research shows how anticipated roles influence mate choice (Eagly, 2009). Many of the criticisms against SVR are critiques that pertain to stage models in general. Duck (1998) for example wrote, "I now realize that filtering theories [or stage theories] overemphasize thought and cognition, and they really only propose a more sophisticated sequence of motors to be switched on" (p. 74). In other words, the stage models may just be a more expanded version of the early one-dimensional "switch-on" models, and there still remain questions regarding why the stages are ordered as they are. In response, Murstein (1987) has suggested that couples realistically gather information regarding each stage throughout the relationship. However, a growing dissatisfaction with the stage models motivated the development of interpersonal process models.

Interpersonal Process Models

Static factors such as social similarity and attitudinal similarity may influence the early development of relationships. However, interpersonal process models of courtship recognize that the actual interaction within relationships is the primary force in the long-term development of relationships. Interpersonal process models also acknowledge that courtship is affected by multiple variables and that there are multiple paths to marriage. Relationships do not necessarily change in linear stages.

One group of researchers (Huston, Surra, Fitzgerald, & Cate, 1981; Surra, 1987; Surra et al., 2004) popularized a method for retrospectively studying changes in commitment leading up to marriage and reasons for such changes. Specifically, the researchers used a graphing method in which they asked participants to report how likely (e.g., 70% chance) it was that they would marry their partner at certain points in time or after certain relationship events (e.g., first kiss, first holiday together, first big fight, etc.). They also asked participants to report what processes (e.g., conflict, preconceived beliefs, events with special meaning, self disclosure) affected upturns or downturns in their certainty toward marriage. This research was inspired by the work of Bolton (1961), who advocated studying subjective inferences about relationship development as a counterpart to objective inferences made by researchers. Using these methods, Surra and her colleagues identified four courtship patterns: (1) *accelerated types*, in which partners moved gradually and rapidly in their certainty toward marriage, (2) *accelerated-arrested types*, in which partners moved rapidly toward marriage early on, but lost some momentum later, (3) *intermediate types*, in which partners progressed steadily toward marriage, but at a more moderate pace, and (4) *prolonged types*, in which partners had unusually long and sometimes rocky courtships.

These retrospective research techniques have spawned numerous other researchers to "take an insider's perspective, and examine individuals' own explanations for their decisions about marriage" (Surra & Hughes, 1997, p. 5). Attention is focused specifically on the turning points that affect commitment in relationships (e.g., Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Baxter & Erbert, 1999;

Baxter & Pittman, 2001; Siegart & Stamp, 1994; Surra & Hughes, 1997). In other words, turning points are crucial events that are perceived by the partners to have affected the trajectory of the relationship. Some turning points affect the relationship positively (e.g., saying “I love you”) and others affect it negatively (e.g., finding out your partner went on a date with someone else). Finding out negative information often increases uncertainty in the relationship (Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985). Surra and Hughes (1997) found that more than half of couples experience unpredictable and nonlinear relational trajectories, as indicated by their significant turning points. Surra and her colleagues (Surra, Arizzi, & Asmussen, 1988; Surra & Hughes, 1997) also found that the turning points or reasons for changes in relationship commitment represent some predominant themes, namely, relationship-driven reasons and event-driven reasons.

Relationship-driven commitments reflect turning points based on “behavioral interdependence (e.g., time spent together and activities done together) and positive and negative attributions about the relationship (e.g., how comfortable they are with one another)” (Surra & Hughes, 1997, p. 8). Commitment changes inspired by relationship-driven reasons are usually gradual changes that occur over time as partners thoughtfully consider their compatibility. Compared to event-driven commitments, relationship-driven commitments typically have fewer significant downturns, less conflict and negativity, more satisfaction, and partners feel surer about their desires to be seriously involved. Surra and Hughes (1997) further argue that relationship-driven commitments follow the courtship patterns suggested by existing mate-selection models that emphasize compatibility testing over time. *Event-driven commitments* are marked by more frequent and dramatic downturns, followed by upturns, followed by downturns, and so on. That is, they have a more “rocky” path (Surra & Hughes, 1997). Changes in event-driven commitments are inspired by external events, possibly involving the social network (e.g., disapproval or approval of the parents), unexpected circumstances (e.g., pregnancy, a job change), or timing (e.g., it was time for me to get married). Event-driven commitments experience more conflict, less satisfaction, and more ambivalence about the relationship.

Studies based on the subjective insider’s perspective have relied heavily on the theoretical perspective of relational dialectics (Baxter, 1990; Baxter & Erbert, 1999; see chapter 2) and chaos theory (Weigel & Murray, 2001). Both theoretical perspectives acknowledge that relationships do not develop in a linear fashion. The relational dialectics perspective argues that in a relationship, it is natural to experience opposing forces and events: For example, Surra and Hughes (1997) remark that some people may find the “passionate, changeable” nature of relationships appealing. Further, chaos theory explains how “seemingly insignificant events, such as a careless comment during an argument or the chance meeting with an old boyfriend, may become devastating for a couple. The careless comment or chance meeting may cause a ripple of other events that can drastically alter the course of the relationship” in a way that traditional mate-selection theories would not predict (Weigel & Murray, 2000, p. 430).

Ecological Models

Up until this review of mate selection models, we organized this chapter according to ecological models of mate selection. These models are appealing because they advocate looking at the whole picture: individual preferences and attributes, couple compatibility and interaction, and the imposing socio-cultural and environmental contexts. Because we have already illustrated how ecological models approach mate selection in the first half of this chapter, here we simply provide a pictorial view of one ecological model. Figure 5.2 represents a specific ecological model by Niehuis et al. (2006). Individuals’ stable attributes affect the compatibility of partners. Those attributes, and the partners’ compatibility, combine to influence couple courtship processes, such as the progression or timeline toward commitment, interaction between partners, and evaluations of the interaction and relationship. These individual and

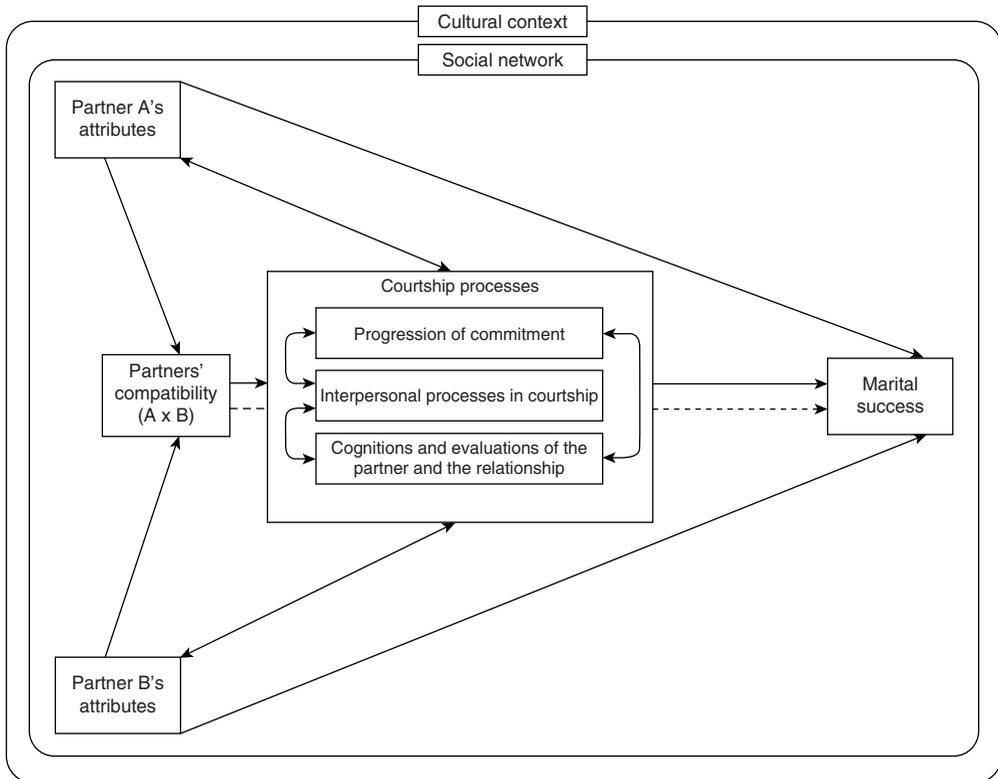


Figure 5.2 Niehuis, Huston, and Rosenband's Ecological Model of Mate Selection.

Note. From Niehuis, S., Huston, T.L., & Rosenband, R. (2006). Courtship into marriage: A new developmental model and methodological critique. *The Journal of Family Communication*, 6(1), 23-47. © National Communication Association, reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis Ltd (<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals>) on behalf of The National Communication Association.

couple factors affect marital success. Larger socio-cultural network factors impact the courtship process and chances of marital success.

Evolutionary Models

Evolutionary models of mate selection are grounded in Darwin's (1859) larger theory of evolution by means of natural selection (TNS). Scholars of evolutionary psychology, and very recently family communication, demonstrate how the TNS affects mate choice and relationship maintenance (Floyd & Haynes, 2005; Floyd & Haynes, 2006). In simple terms, the drive for survival of the species subjects humans to adaptive, evolutionary forces of natural selection. Mate selection processes have adapted to enhance reproductive success and the propagation of genes (Buss & Kenrick, 1998; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Shackelford & Buss, 1997; Sprecher, Sullivan, & Hatfield, 1994; Wu, 2001). Floyd and Haynes (2006) describe how forces of natural selection influence the body and mind, although humans are not necessarily aware of how these forces affect their thinking. When individuals choose mates today, they are not consciously thinking about maximizing reproduction (Kenrick, Groth, Trost, & Sadalla, 1993). Instead, they are conditioned subconsciously to prefer traits and characteristics that maximize reproduction.

Although males and females appear to seek out some similar qualities in the opposite sex, evolutionary models have traditionally focused on differential preferences between the sexes (Kenrick et al., 1993). According to evolutionary theories, when selecting mates, men seek

traits in women that are indicative of physical fitness and the ability to successfully bear children.

Our ancestral humans did have access to three classes of cues that provide probabilistic evidence of a woman's age and health status: (a) features of physical appearance (e.g., full lips, clear skin, smooth skin, clear eyes, lustrous hair, symmetry, good muscle tone, [appropriate hip to waist ratio], and absence of lesions) (b) observable behavior (e.g., sprightly, youthful gait and high activity level), and (c) social reputation (e.g., knowledge gleaned from others about a person's age and prior health history). (Buss & Schmitt, 1993, p. 208)

The theory predicts that women would seek qualities in a male that are indicative of resource provision (e.g., a good job, a good income, strength). To be more specific, women want men who will remain committed to investing their external resources to children and to have sufficient internal resources (e.g., being a loving partner and father) to facilitate their ability to raise children. Because women are invested in childbirth and childrearing, it is important for them to find a mate with the potential to provide resources over the long-term. Thus, men and women have different costs and contributions associated with reproduction and childrearing.

Men and women are accorded mate value based on their contributions to the reproductive goal, though men and women are valuable for different reasons. Physical attractiveness is the characteristic that affords women the most mate value, while for men it is resources. Mate value is often positively correlated in relationships, such that women who are more attractive desire men who are more resourceful, and vice versa (Buss & Shackelford, 2008; Miner, Starratt, & Shackelford, 2009; Shackelford & Buss, 1997). Evolutionary psychology further suggests that relative to women, men are more selective about marriage partners than casual sex partners (e.g., a one night stand) (Kenrick, et al., 1993). In other words, men, especially, are more selective about partners with whom they intend to produce children. Women appear to have similar levels of selectivity whether for a one night stand or a marriage partner, because they would bear a direct burden if they became pregnant in either situation. The higher level of investment, particularly parental investment, in marriage prompts partners to engage in mate-guarding. Women must guard their mates from "mate poachers" who could lure their partner and his resources away (Davies, Shackelford, Hass, 2007; Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Men must also guard their mates to ensure that their investments are worthwhile. Men want to be sure that they are investing resources in children who are truly their own, not those of a mate-poacher. For this reason, both men and women do well to look for qualities of fidelity in a partner (Schmitt, 2008).

Evolutionary theories of mate selection have been questioned and critiqued in a few domains. Some ask whether the influences of culture and social norms are ever stronger than those of biology. For example, what about a woman who makes a lot of money and does not need the resources of a man to support children, or does not even desire children? For similar reasons, the theory has been difficult to apply to the homosexual population, given these people are not having sex to procreate (Gobrogge et al., 2007). In such situations, does the theory accurately predict what people look for in a mate? Kenrick, Li, and Butner (2003) argue that "culture is not a phenomenon outside the stream of human evolution but an emergent dynamic that interacts with the decision rules of the individuals who make up societies" (Kenrick et al., 2003, p. 22). Another critique of evolutionary theories is that while self-reported mate preferences correspond with the theory, it is unclear whether people actually select mates based on their evolutionary preferences (Surra, 1998). Environmental or cultural factors may keep one from acting on preferences. As Floyd and Haynes (2005) caution, few evolutionary psychologists try to argue that behavior is purely determined by TNS. But mate selection scholars would be remiss not to acknowledge the strong forces of TNS.

COHABITATION

Prior to the 1960s, a majority of people in the U.S. considered cohabiting (i.e., living together in a nonmarital union) to be deviant behavior (Seltzer, 2000). Today, over half of first marriages begin in cohabitation, and some estimates are as high as 70% (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009). Compared to first marriages, rates of cohabitation are even higher for remarriages (Stewart, Manning, & Smock, 2003). Cohabitation is so common that some researchers view it as a stage of courtship (McGinnis, 2003; Seltzer, 2000). Indeed, many couples themselves say cohabitation is a necessary stage in their courtship (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991; McGinnis, 2003). An increasing number of cohabitants see cohabitation as an end, not a “prelude” to marriage (Seltzer, 2000). For heterosexual couples, the trend to cohabit as an alternative to marriage is relatively recent. In the 1990s, only 35% of cohabitators who formed unions at age 25 or older married their partners within 3 years of starting to live together, compared with 60% in the 1970s (Seltzer, 2000). Given these statistics, it is not surprising that cohabitation is also a setting in which many couples bear their first child, if they have not done so prior to cohabitation. Many unmarried people who find out they are pregnant choose to cohabit upon the birth of their child. Among African Americans, choices to cohabit after or before the birth of the child are less common compared to Whites (Pinsof, 2002).

In select cases, cohabitation has been hypothesized to contribute to a decline in the number of divorces. As Bumpass and Lu (2000) argue, some “high-risk” relationships that would have been sure to end in divorce instead dissolve during cohabitation. However, researchers have consistently found that marriages preceded by cohabitation are more likely to end in separation or divorce, especially for those who cohabit prior to engagement versus after engagement (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Stanley, Rhoades, Amato, Markman, & Johnson, 2010; Sweet & Bumpass, 1992). Is this really true? And if so, why or in what instances? To answer these questions, we explore the validity of the arguments that “people who cohabit are different” *and* that “cohabitation changes people” (Seltzer, 2000). We should also note that most research on cohabitation pertains to heterosexual couples because homosexual couples have few options but to see cohabitation as an end in states where same-sex marriages have not been legally recognized. Same-sex commitment ceremonies, which are on the rise, appear to be a way for same-sex couples to formalize their commitment beyond cohabitation.

Are People Who Cohabit Different?

There are three primary hypotheses, each with varying levels of support, to explain the idea that people who cohabit are different from those who do not cohabit. The first hypothesis argues that the positive relationship between cohabitation and marital instability is an artifact of *union duration* (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002). This argument is based on the evidence that marital satisfaction typically declines over time in a relationship. If it is the case that cohabiting causes couples to delay marriage, compared to noncohabitants, then cohabitants are further along the trajectory toward relational decline. The union duration hypothesis has received only mixed support (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002).

Another explanation for the higher rates of marital instability among cohabitators is *selection effects* (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002). Selection effects refer to the idea that many people who cohabit also possess characteristics that are risk factors for divorce: lower income, less education, parental divorce, being non-White, younger age, lower religiosity, premarital pregnancy and childbirth, and greater acceptance of divorce (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002). According to the selection effects explanation, marital instability is not a result of cohabitation per se, but is related instead to the kind of people who tend to cohabit. There is some support for this argument. For example, Tach and Halpern-Meekin (2009)

found that “it is not premarital cohabitation alone that [negatively] influences the quality of marriages, but rather premarital childbearing,” which often occurs in the context of cohabitation (p. 313). But as cohabitation has become more normative, some of the other social characteristics (e.g., low income, less education) that once separated cohabitators from noncohabitators are gradually dissipating. In particular, cohabitators who intend to marry do not differ greatly from noncohabiting couples with regard to many of these social characteristics (Skinner, Bahr, Crane, & Call, 2002). Still, some propose that even when these selection characteristics are controlled, people who cohabit may be at greater risk for divorce than those who do not (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002).

A third hypothesis, the *social context* explanation, contends that cohabitators receive less social support for their relationship than do conventional couples. Dykstra (1993) found that cohabitators received less support from their families. Friends and family may either pressure the cohabiting couple to marry or, to the contrary, deny the relationship the respect offered to a married couple. Marriage ceremonies formally invite friends and family into a supportive context for the relationship, and decisions to cohabit are often individual decisions that do not explicitly invite family support. However, Skinner et al. (2002) reveals that short-term cohabiting couples are not as stigmatized by their social networks as are long-term cohabitators. Many short-term cohabitators express intentions to marry and have social networks that accept cohabitation as a stage of relationship development. Such couples that cohabit for a short-term have marital quality similar to married couples that do not cohabit (Skinner et al., 2002). Guzzo’s (2009) research suggests that nearly half of cohabitators begin living together with definite plans to marry their partner, and still more believe that they will eventually marry even if they do not have clear plans to marry once they begin living together (p. 198). Evidence seems to indicate that *some* cohabitators, particularly long-term cohabitators without intentions to marry, lack external support for their relationship, which contributes to relational instability.

So are people who cohabit different? Short term cohabitators, especially those with intentions to marry, do not appear to be much different from those who do not cohabit. Even though cohabitation per se does not appear to be problematic for these committed couples, when nonmarital childrearing is involved any kind of relationship is placed under stress, regardless of whether the couple is committed or not or whether they go on to marry or not (Tach & Halpern-Meekin, 2009).

Does Cohabitation Change People?

Brines and Joyner (1999) argue that cohabitation inhibits joint investment in the relationship. They found, for example, that in comparison to married couples, cohabitators were more likely to emphasize autonomy, equality, and fairness with regard to a number of relationship issues involving time, household chores, and money. It appears that many cohabitators keep a careful watch over their investment in the relationship and the balance of exchange between partners. Without a formal relationship contract (i.e., a marriage contract), partners can theoretically leave at any time. The uncertainty of the relationship’s future, says Brines and Joyner, motivates people to monitor how much they should invest in an uncertain relationship. That is, they take on a quid pro quo attitude (i.e., “you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours”). Although people in marriages are not immune to it, this attitude may be especially prevalent in cohabiting relationships where cohabitation is viewed as a way to “test” the relationship and a partner’s commitment.

More recently, Joyner (2009) found that in comparison to married couples, cohabiting couples were more likely to break up over perceptions that their relationships are not fair. In particular, unengaged men and engaged women who felt underbenefitted were more likely to separate. Joyner explains that with no plans to marry, unengaged men may have low commitment and low tolerance for feeling underbenefitted. With plans to marry, engaged women may

have higher expectations. The engaged women may feel that if they are providing benefits to their male partners (e.g., sexual access and domestic services) without reciprocation, then they would be better off getting out of the suspect relationship now. Joyner also found that married couples who were more satisfied were better able to overlook situations where they were under-benefitted. As Gottman (1999) contends, “unhappy couples are the ones who keep count of positives given and received, whereas happy couples are positive unconditionally” (p. 12). The summary of Brines and Joyner’s (1999) research is that cohabiting couples, particularly those without intentions to marry, have more exchange-like relationships rather than communal relationships. The exchange relationships breed less joint commitment and investment in the relationship and more acceptance of divorce.

Do spouses who cohabited prior to marriage have different communication in their future marriages compared to those who did not cohabit? Cohan and Kleinbaum (2002) directly addressed this question in one of the first studies on cohabitation to examine marital behavior and communication through observation. They found that premarital cohabitation is associated with more “destructive and divisive” communication (e.g., verbal aggression, coercion, negative escalation) during problem solving. Spouses who cohabited before marriage were less successful at providing support to their partners and soliciting support from them (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002). Both couples with single and multiple cohabitation experiences exhibited poorer communication in their marriages than those with no cohabitation experience. However, people with multiple cohabitation experiences were worse off than those with just a single cohabitation experience with their spouse. Does cohabitation change people in terms of how they function in their relationships? The answer seems to depend on the couple’s commitment level. In Rhoades, Stanelly, and Markman’s (2009) research, couples who cohabited prior to becoming engaged had lower satisfaction, dedication, confidence, and more negative communication and divorce potential compared to those who cohabited after engagement or not at all. Commitment levels, more than cohabitation per se, seem to change how couples relate.

CONCLUSION

A vast majority of people marry or cohabit with an intimate partner sometime in their life. When choosing a partner, individual attributes and preferences are influential. Over the last century, individuals have expressed stronger preferences for physical attractiveness, financial resources, and mutual love/attraction.

Courtship, however, is not a one-way street. Our mates must choose us as well. Together, potential partners consider couple factors such as assortive matching, compatibility, and the quality of couple interaction. One of the most important conclusions from this chapter is that the stage is set for couple interaction early on and the transition to a formal or legal union does not appear to change interaction patterns. Although partners create a relationship culture, their relationship is not in a vacuum. The external environment impacts mate pairings. People must deal with contextual circumstances that affect a partner’s availability as well as pressure against or support for the relationship from the couple’s social-cultural network. Couples are better off when they have a supportive social network. Other environmental contexts, such as long distance relationships and online dating, influence the ability to meet people and change traditional schema for getting to know someone.

With the multitude of factors that affect mate pairings, researchers have struggled to construct models of mate selection. Several prominent models of mate selection became popular during the last century, for example, stage models, interpersonal process models, ecological models, and evolutionary models. These models have met varying degrees of support and are still being developed. Models that reflect the complexities of courtship appear most useful.

Another major change over the last few decades is the increase of cohabitation prior to marriage. Cohabitation is so common that some now consider it to be a stage of relationship development. Not all cohabiting relationships are the same, and people who are uncommitted seem to be at more risk for relationship problems. As a follow-up to our study of courtship and mate selection, we explore in chapter 6 the communication behaviors that help to maintain marriages and intimate partnerships over time.

6 Marriage and Intimate Partnerships

Approximately 90% of Americans expect to marry at some point in their lives, and most expect their marriages to be a lifelong commitment (DeFrain & Olson, 1999; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). Despite high divorce rates in the U.S., there are strong societal expectations to marry, and to have a marriage that is full of intimacy and romance. People in marriages face countless risk factors for marital distress. For those who experience marital distress, the emotional and physical consequences are far-reaching. Because we deal extensively with marital distress and divorce in subsequent chapters, this chapter is devoted to understanding what successful couples do to maintain and repair their marriages. A concentrated focus on the processes that lead to marital success is critical, because “it is not prudent to assume that the road to happiness and good health is to simply not do that which apparently leads to sickness and unhappiness” (Segrin, 2006, pp. 16–17). Some of the best researchers in marital communication focus attention on the behaviors and perceptions characteristic of spouses in successful marriages. In this chapter, we explore these behaviors and perceptions to better understand what successful couples are doing and saying to each other, as well as how they are thinking about their partners and their relationship. We also address questions about whether there is more than one way to make a marriage to work. Our review of couple types illustrates that although there are some general principles common to successful marriages, not all couples approach relational processes in the same way. Finally, as we examine different types of couples, we explore the strengths and challenges of same-sex couples and long-term married couples.

WHAT IS MARITAL SUCCESS?

Whether a marriage is considered successful or not depends on the criteria used to judge success. *Institutional criteria* measure the extent to which marriage meets the instrumental needs of an individual and society. For example, does the marriage support dependents socially and economically or uphold religious and family tradition? *Companionate criteria* measure the extent to which marriage fulfills psychological needs and desires, including emotional security, happiness, intimacy, or, as Cooper (1999) describes, the “sentiments” of marriage (p. 22). Some scholars argue that a little over a century ago a historical shift took place, in which the companionate criteria took precedence over the institutional considerations, particularly in the Western world (Popenoe, 2007; Shorter, 1975). The result of this shift is that modern societal judgments of marital success in the U.S. heavily emphasize companionship, intimacy, and romance. Yet even today, marital success requires attention to both companionate *and* institutional goals, especially when children are involved (Cooper, 1999; Orbach, Veroff, Hassan, & Horrocks, 2002). Further, the extent to which spouses favor companionate criteria over institutional criteria is influenced by cultural context. For example, mutual love and attraction

appear to be valued in most all cultures; however, spouses with individualist self-construals place an even greater emphasis on their socioemotional connection and the expression of romantic love than do spouses with collectivist self-construals (Ting-Toomey, 1991).

Measuring Marital Success

Researchers typically judge marital success with one or more of the following measures: stability and duration, satisfaction and adjustment, and commitment. *Stability* refers to whether a marriage remains intact or dissolves (Wright, Nelson, & Georgen, 1994), and *duration* refers to the number of years the marriage remains intact. Being in a stable marriage does not guarantee that spouses will be satisfied with or committed to their marriage. For a variety of reasons, spouses may remain in a marriage though they lack satisfaction or certain types of commitment. For example, some spouses say they remain married “for the children.”

Satisfaction and *adjustment* are also used to assess marital success. Satisfaction refers to the extent to which a partner subjectively feels enjoyment, contentment, and love in the relationship (Hendrick, 1988). Compared to satisfaction, adjustment is defined more broadly. Adjustment refers to whether spouses have mastered the tasks necessary for marriage (Wright et al., 1994), so that they are not only satisfied, but also skilled in dealing with marital issues such as agreement, conflict, expression of affection, or companionate activities (Spanier, 1976). Considerable evidence suggests that marital satisfaction and adjustment fluctuate over the course of the marriage, with the largest declines in satisfaction occurring in the early years of marriage.

Although researchers have historically examined marital satisfaction and adjustment with much more vigor than commitment, the focus on *commitment* as a measure of marital success has intensified in the last few decades. In the 1990s, Johnson proposed three separate dimensions to commitment that could be measured separately: personal commitment, moral commitment, and structural commitment (Johnson, 1991; Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999). *Personal commitment* refers to a person’s desire for staying in a relationship and is affected by one’s attraction to the partner, the relationship, and the couple identity. *Moral commitment* involves the moral obligation one feels to remain in a relationship. One may feel morally obligated to a set of values, to another person, or to the particular value of consistency. *Structural commitment* consists of the constraints or barriers to leaving a relationship. Constraints could include a lack of alternative partners, pressure from one’s social network to remain in the relationship, an unwillingness to enter the procedural tasks of ending a relationship, or an unwillingness to part from the time and resources put into the relationship.

Overall, researchers generally assume that marital success is marked by stability, along with high marital satisfaction/adjustment and commitment. Although stability, satisfaction/adjustment, and the various types of commitment have been found to be separate constructs that measure different aspects of a relationship, there are often moderate to high correlations among these constructs (Flanagan et al., 2002; Flora, 1998). In other words, it is likely that high satisfaction, strong commitment, and stability are linked for many couples.

Marital quality dynamically changes over the course of most marriages, making measurements over time informative. For example, when reflecting on their marriage, some spouses can specifically point to “good” years and “bad” years in their marital satisfaction and commitment, perhaps related to temporal stressors or dialectical tensions that push and pull at spouses’ feelings (Byrd, 2009; see also chapter 2). Keeping the sentiments of two people in balance over time is no small challenge.

Understanding Marital Success: Models

In 1999, Gottman articulated his “core triad of balance” theory, which argues that marital interaction should be understood from three domains of human experience: behavior,

perception, and physiology (p. 33). Behavior refers to the verbal and nonverbal behaviors that spouses exchange. Perception refers to the way people cognitively process behaviors and events. Two people may perceive the same behavior differently. The domain of physiology refers to the way one's body feels and functions (e.g., heart rate, breathing) as a result of behaviors and perceptions in the relationship. According to Gottman, these three domains are overlapping, interactive, and influenced by interpersonal processes. Furthermore, marital success rests upon regulating each domain at a "stable, steady state" (Gottman, 1999, p. 33). One could think back to the systems theory notion of homeostasis (see chapter 2). When the negative threshold of any domain in the triad is exceeded, the marital system becomes unstable (Carrère, Buehlman, Gottman, Coan, & Ruckstuhl, 2000).

We discuss the domain of physiology in chapter 14, "Family Interaction and Physical Health." In the present chapter, we address the domains of behavior and perception. That is, what specifically do couples do and think in order to achieve and maintain successful marriages? To answer this question, researchers have conducted countless studies using both observation of spouses' behavior and self-report methods. Results of these studies have prompted researchers to articulate general models of marital success as well as specific lists of behaviors and perceptions that are pivotal to relationship maintenance and repair.

The Relationship Bank Account Model

The relationship bank account model is a general model of marital success. Several researchers, including Gottman and Markman, have used the analogy of an emotional bank account in marriage. For example, in Markman's relational bank account model of marital satisfaction and erosion (Clements, Cordova, Markman, & Laurenceau, 1997; Markman, 1984), positive relational behaviors (e.g., affection, intimacy, compliments, agreements) are equivalent to "deposits" in the account. Negative relational behaviors (e.g., put downs, criticisms, defensiveness) function as "withdrawals." Marital satisfaction depends on the "balance" in the relational bank account. In order to keep a positive balance, spouses must make more deposits to the relationship than withdrawals. Gottman (1994) has even gone so far as to say that most stable, happy couples maintain around a 5:1 ratio of positive to negative behaviors, and that the ratio appears to be even larger for these couples when they discuss non-conflict topics such as the events of the day. Some marital researchers take issue with this ratio, claiming that it is too simplistic or even dangerous to reduce positive and negative behaviors to a ratio. Still, Gottman's general message is important. The relationships of stable, happy couples are defined by positivity more than negativity. Otherwise stated, the people in these relationships foster a culture of positivity.

The culture of positivity is driven not just by behaviors, but also by perceptions. What is perceived as a "withdrawal" in one relationship may be overlooked or even perceived as a "deposit" in another relationship. Markman suggests that throughout the course of a marriage, it is functional to view one's relationship through rose-colored glasses, at least to a certain extent. Spouses do well to focus on the positive versus negative aspects of their partner and to exercise perceptual biases in ways that give the partner the benefit of the doubt (Murray, Holmes, & Griffen, 1996, 2003). Some premarital couples are perhaps too good at extending perceptual biases. Markman (1984) observes, some "premarital couples may be 'in love with love' and the idea of getting married, and these romantic feelings screen out negative events and highlight positive events" (p. 264). The warning signs for eventual marital distress are there, but they just do not look at them. Noller and Feeney (2002) found that women commonly proceed with marriage even when they are aware of and dissatisfied with maladaptive conflict processes in the relationship. Too much unrealistic optimism can backfire, but some optimism and positive perceptions are at the heart of maintaining a positive relationship bank account.

Understanding Marital Success: Relationship Maintenance Principles

The idea behind relationship maintenance is for couples to care for their relationship in a preemptive way, rather than waiting until the health of the marriage has deteriorated. Contrary to popular belief, a majority of relationship maintenance behaviors are the small and sometimes routine behaviors that keep a healthy marriage going. Other times relationship maintenance and repair occurs in strategic ways. Stafford, Dainton, and Haas (2000) distinguish routine behaviors, which include the ordinary and even mundane behaviors that partners pursue on a daily basis, from strategic behaviors, which refer to behaviors that are “consciously and intentionally enacted to meet a particular goal—in this case, relational maintenance” (p. 307).

In this chapter, we present two well-developed programs of research, in which scholars have produced specific lists of important relationship maintenance behaviors and perceptions. Canary and Stafford (1992) originally presented a list of five primary relationship maintenance behaviors (i.e., positivity, openness, assurances, shared networks, and shared tasks), but the typology has been expanded in other research (Stafford et al., 2000; Table 6.1). Even though Canary and Stafford’s work has focused mostly on relationship maintenance *behaviors*, subsequent research demonstrates that the motivation to use these behaviors, as well as the recognition that one’s partner is using these behaviors, is closely intertwined with perceptions. For example, people who perceive their relationships to be more satisfying and committed also engage in more relationship maintenance behaviors, and they have spouses who engage in more relationship maintenance behaviors (Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 2008). Wives who perceive more equity in their marriage engage in more relationship maintenance behaviors, as do their husbands (Stafford & Canary, 2006). Further, people’s attachment styles affect their use of maintenance behaviors and their perception of a partner’s relationship maintenance efforts (Dainton, 2007). For instance, people with dismissive attachment styles report using fewer relationship maintenance behaviors and do not recognize that their partners are attempting to engage in maintenance behaviors. As Dainton (2007) aptly points out, the maintenance behaviors are likely not recognized because they are not valued by dismissive individuals (p. 294).

Another well-recognized and longstanding program of research by John Gottman identifies seven principles that are characteristic of successful marriages (Table 6.2). It is informative to look at Gottman’s typology and Stafford and Canary’s typology side by side, in order to compare the considerable overlap between the two lists. Most notably, both lists point to the importance of successfully negotiating, through interaction, intimacy and conflict. Gottman’s approach pays more attention to thoughts and perceptions at the outset, along with behaviors. The principles of “enhancing love maps,” “nurturing fondness and admiration,” and “creating shared meaning” are about orienting thoughts so as to appreciate one’s partner and recognize the meaning in the relationship. Again, perceptions and behaviors are linked in a bi-directional way, because having a meaningful emotional connection with one’s partner feeds positive behavior and vice versa.

It should be noted that neither list of maintenance behaviors/perceptions is meant to be exhaustive. The mass of literature on marriage provides other suggestions for behaviors and perceptions that maintain a marriage. Nonetheless, these lists offer a starting point for studying relationship maintenance in marriage.

BEHAVIORS AND RELATIONSHIP MAINTENANCE

We are now poised to look at common themes in the relationship maintenance typologies and to explore other research related to these themes. We begin with a focused look at behaviors in relationship maintenance, followed by a review of perceptions in relationship maintenance.

Table 6.1 Stafford, Dainton, and Hass (2000): Relationship maintenance scale

Assurances

1. I say "I love you."
2. I show my love for my partner.
3. I imply that our relationship has a future.
4. I tell my partner how much s/he means to me.
5. I talk about our plans for the future.
6. I stress my commitment to him/her.
7. I show him/her how much he/she means to me.
8. I talk about future events (e.g., having children or anniversaries or retirement, etc.).

Openness

9. I encourage my partner to share his/her feelings with me.
10. I simply tell my partner how I feel about the relationship.
11. I talk about my fears.
12. I disclose what I need or want from the relationship.
13. I like to have periodic talks about our relationship.
14. I am open about my feelings.
15. I talk about where we stand.

Conflict management

16. I apologize when I am wrong.
17. I cooperate in how I handle disagreements.
18. I listen to my partner and try not to judge.
19. I am understanding.
20. I am patient and forgiving with my partner.

Shared tasks

21. I help equally with the tasks that need to be done.
22. I offer to do things that aren't "my" responsibility.
23. I do my fair share of the work we have to do.
24. I perform my household responsibilities.
25. I do not shirk my duties.

Positivity

26. I act cheerful and positive around him/her.
27. I try to be upbeat when we are together.

Advice

28. I tell my partner what I think s/he should do about her/his problems.
29. I give him/her my opinion on things going on in his/her life.

Social networks

30. I like to spend time with our same friends.
31. I focus on common friends and affiliations.

Note. From Stafford, L., Dainton, M., & Haas, S. (2000). Measuring routine and strategic relational maintenance: Scale revision, sex versus gender roles, and the prediction of relational characteristics. *Communication Monographs*, 37, 306–323. Reprinted by permission of the publisher (Taylor & Francis Ltd, www.tandf.co.uk/journals).

In each case, we explore how behaviors and perceptions are used to negotiate intimacy and conflict in close relationships.

Behaviors and Intimacy

What is intimacy? According to Reis and Patrick (1996), intimacy "refers to an interactive process in which, as a result of a partner's response, individuals come to feel understood, validated, and cared for" (p. 536). This process begins with a person's desire to connect with another emotionally. This desire prompts individuals to risk expressing themselves.

Table 6.2 Gottman's (1999) Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work

1. Enhance your love maps

Description: Being intimately familiar with each other's world, remembering major events in each other's history and keeping updated on the facts and feelings of your spouse's world.

Examples: My spouse is familiar with my current stresses.
I feel that my spouse knows me pretty well.
I can tell you in detail my first impressions of my partner.

2. Nurture fondness and admiration

Description: Maintaining a sense that the other person is worthy of being respected and liked and expressing respect and liking.

Examples: I can easily list three things I most admire about my partner.
I often find some way to tell my partner "I love you."
My partner appreciates the things I do in this marriage.

3. Turn toward each other

Description: Responding to a partner's bids for attention, affection, humor, or support in both small and large ways.

Examples: My partner is usually interested in hearing my views on things.
We enjoy doing even the smallest things together, like folding laundry or watching TV.
At the end of a day my partner is glad to see me.

4. Let your partner influence you

Description: Letting your spouse influence your decision making by taking his or her feelings and opinions into account.

Examples: I don't reject my spouse's opinions out of hand.
I try to communicate respect even during our disagreements.
I usually want my partner to feel that what he or she says really counts with me.

5. Solve your solvable problems

Description: Identifying and solving those problems that are minor irritants or situational disagreements rather than letting them carry over to other areas of your lives.

Techniques: Start up conflicts softly rather than harshly.
Learn how to repair previous behavior.
Monitor and regulate your negative affect (emotion).
Learn how to compromise.
Become more tolerant of each other's imperfections.

6. Overcome gridlock

Description: Identifying and dealing with perpetual problems that will always be present in the marriage.

Techniques: Explore the hidden issues that are causing the gridlock.
Rather than solve the problem, learn to enter dialogue about these issue and share dreams behind the conflict.

7. Create shared meaning

Description: Creating and sharing a relational culture with symbols and rituals that represent what it means to be a part of the relationship.

Examples: We share many of the same goals in our life together.
We both value special celebrations (like birthdays, anniversaries, and family reunions).
We have ways of becoming renewed and refreshed when we are burned out or fatigued.

Note. From Gottman, J.M., and Silver, N. (1999). *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. Copyright ©1999 by John M. Gottman, Ph.D., and Nan Silver. Used by permission of Crown Publishers, a division of Random House, Inc.

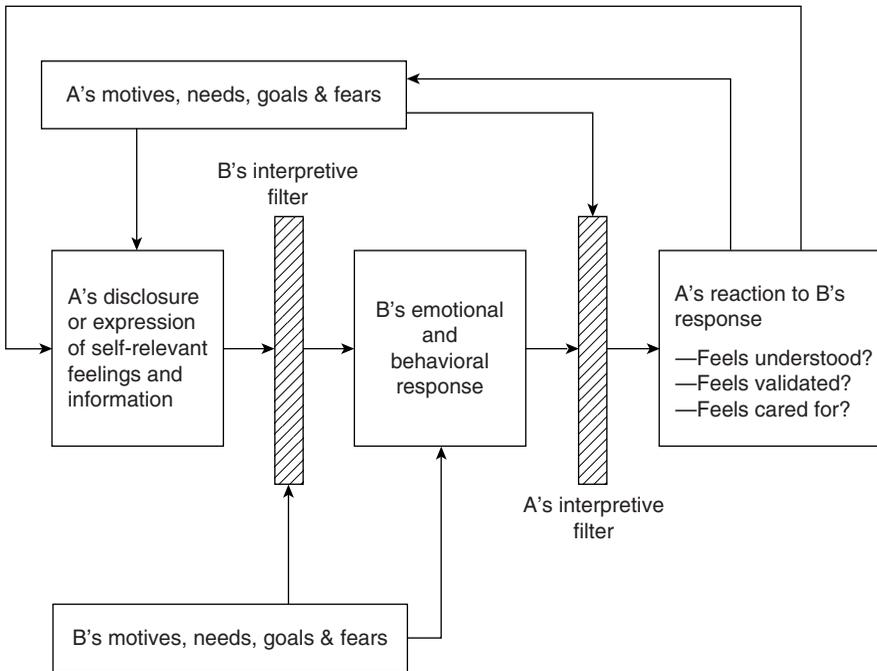


Figure 6.1 Interpersonal process model of intimacy.

Note. From *Social Psychology: Handbook of Basic Principles* (pp. 523–563), by H.T. Reiss and B.C. Patrick, 1996, New York: Guilford. Copyright 1996 by Guilford Publications. Guilford Press. Reprinted with permission.

Self-expression occurs in verbal (e.g., self-disclosure) and nonverbal (e.g., emotional expressions) forms. Individuals then desire their partners to *respond to their self-expressions* with understanding, validation, and care. Next, individuals make *interpretive judgments* about whether their partner's response to their self-expression fulfills their needs. Because judgments are interpretive, any given response may be perceived to fulfill the needs of one partner and not another. Figure 6.1 illustrates this interpersonal process model of intimacy, as described by Reis and Patrick (1996) and originally proposed by Reis and Shaver (1988).

The interpersonal process model of intimacy has been validated with married couples (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Rovine, 2005; Mitchell et al. 2008). Laurenceau et al. (2005) found that partner responsiveness (i.e., expressing understanding, validation, and care) predicts intimacy even above the effects of self-disclosure and partner-disclosure. Laurenceau et al. deliver the message that while self-disclosure is a necessary condition for intimacy, the thunder of partner responsiveness helps to sufficiently explain intimacy. Furthermore, the Laurenceau et al. study teases out gender differences in the intimacy process, with the finding that wives' intimacy was more strongly linked to their husbands' level of responsiveness than vice versa. More recently, Mitchell et al. (2008) revealed more about these gender differences, and demonstrated that the different kinds of empathic responding described in the model have unique effects. The first take-home message from the Mitchell et al. study is that husbands' behavior makes a big difference in both their own and their wives' experience of intimacy. Men's intimacy was predicted by their own disclosure and empathic responding. Women's intimacy was predicted by their husband's disclosure and empathic responding. Does it matter what form husbands' empathic responding takes? Men appeared to experience more intimacy when they found themselves offering more caring responses, but not necessarily responses of validation and understanding. Women experienced more intimacy when they felt responses of understanding, validation, and to some extent caring, from their husbands.

As the interpersonal process model of intimacy implicates, intimacy depends on both behaviors and perceptions. In this section of the chapter, we explore in more detail specific behaviors that relate to intimacy. We begin with behaviors related to self expression.

Self-expressive Behaviors: Self-disclosure and Affection

Both Gottman's and Stafford and Canary's relationship maintenance typologies have themes of self expression, in the form of self-disclosure and affection. Although the typologies have common themes, the terminology varies. For Stafford and Canary, self-disclosure and affection occur within concepts they term "assurances," "openness," and "positivity," while Gottman expects that self-disclosure and affection are a part of concepts he calls "enhancing love maps" and "nurturing fondness and admiration."

As the interpersonal process model of intimacy suggests, self-disclosure spawns the intimacy process. For this reason scholars have devoted an enormous amount of research to self-disclosure (e.g., Altmann & Taylor, 1973; Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993; Greff & Malherbe, 2001; Reis & Patrick, 1996). Self-disclosure involves verbally sharing personal or private information with another in an intentional way. Through self-disclosure, spouses come to know each other—to know their likes, dislikes, hopes, and fears. Gottman, for example, says that spouses can then use this information to form a "love map" of their partners.

Not only is self-disclosure crucial in the development of dating relationships and in early marriage, but it is also important throughout the course of a marriage. As spouses grow and change over time, self-disclosure is a means for them to stay connected. Compared to less satisfied couples, satisfied couples spend more time "debriefing" each other about the events of the day (Vangelisti & Banski, 1993). As one might expect, self-disclosure is related to greater emotional involvement and relationship satisfaction (Derlega et al. 1993; Rubin, Hill, Peplau, & Dunkel-Schetter, 1980).

In some limited situations, refraining from self-disclosure is positively linked to marital satisfaction (see also chapter 3). For some couples, there may be difficult topics or conflictive issues that are best left avoided. These difficult topics could include criticisms (e.g., "I don't like how you've let yourself get so overweight") or issues that repeatedly lead to gridlocked conflict. In these special cases, restraint may stem from a partner's tolerance of unpleasant aspects of the other. As Finkenauer and Hazam (2000) put it, "people who are satisfied with their marriage may be competent communicators who possess the skill to diagnose when to use disclosure versus secrecy in a way that ensures relational satisfaction" (p. 259). Such social skills involve decisions about whether the benefits of restraint outweigh the costs. Decisions to keep some things secret in a marriage may have immediate benefits, but long-term costs. Finkenauer and Hazam are careful to warn that individuals who use an extreme amount of secrecy or seem to have a disposition characterized by secrecy tend to be less satisfied with their marriages. Furthermore, the suspicion that one's partner keeps information from him or her is negatively associated with marital satisfaction. Negotiating self-disclosure is an important part of marriage, and, with only some exceptions, high amounts of self-disclosure enhance emotional intimacy.

Related to self-disclosure, another way spouses express themselves is through the "bids" they make for affection and attention (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001). "A bid can be a question, a gesture, a look, a touch—any single expression that says, 'I want to be connected to you'" (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001, p. 4). Bids stem from a natural desire to feel intimately connected. Occasionally spouses directly express their need for connection (e.g., A husband discloses to a wife, "I wish we could spend more time together"). Often, bids are more subtle, as indicated by Gottman and DeClaire's (2001) examples:

Vocalizing: such as laughing, chuckling, grunting, sighing, or groaning in a way that invites interaction or interest.

Affectionate touching: such as a back-slap, a handshake, a pat, a squeeze, a kiss, a hug, or a back or shoulder rub.

Affiliating gestures: such as opening a door, offering a place to sit, handing over a utensil, or pointing to a shared activity or interest. (p. 31)

Flirting behaviors fall into the category of emotional bids for attention and affection. Even though flirting is often studied in dating relationships, Frisby (2009) found that flirting is still critical for married couples as a means of showing positivity, expressing love and interest, complimenting their partners, and even repairing or deescalating conflict. Verbally, flirting can take the form of public or private nicknames (e.g., Honey, Baby), teasing in an affectionate or sexual way, or using other expressions idiosyncratic to the relationship (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1993).

A majority of bids for affection and attention take a nonverbal form. Indeed, Patterson (1983) concluded that one of the primary functions of nonverbal behavior is to express intimacy. Some, or all, of the following behaviors cluster together to express intimacy through nonverbal involvement: more forward lean, closer proximity, more eye contact, more direct and open body orientation, more touching, more positive facial and vocal expressions, more frequent and intense interruptions, a faster speaking rate. Relying on earlier work on facial expression by Ekman and Friesen (1978; see also Ekman, 2003), Gottman, Levenson, and Woodin (2001) examined what facial expressions reveal about marital quality. Previously, Ekman drew attention to two different types of smiles. The Duchenne smile (named after the researcher who first identified it) refers to a smile of genuine, felt happiness. The Duchenne smile not only activates the muscles around the mouth/cheeks to form a smile, but, most important, the skin around the outer corner of the eye wrinkles. In an unfeigned smile, or a “fake” smile, the mouth/cheek muscles move to a lesser degree and the eye muscles do not wrinkle. During videotaped interviews with married couples, Gottman et al. found a higher frequency of the genuine Duchenne smiles in spouses who had positive perceptions of their marriage. Spouses with poor perceptions of their marriage exhibited more unfeigned smiles, as well as more facial expressions of contempt, anger, and fear. It is difficult to say whether the Duchenne smiles stem from marital satisfaction or whether the smiles drive the satisfaction. The likely answer in the case of facial expressions, as well as other expressions of affection and self-disclosure, is that there is a bi-directional relationship.

Partner Responsiveness: Turning Toward, Decoding, and Offering Support

The interpersonal process model of intimacy suggests that intimacy develops when partners respond to self-expressions with understanding, validation, and care. In the emotional bidding process (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001), intimacy depends on whether the partner responds by accepting the bids. Bids are accepted by figuratively *turning toward* the person and offering confirming messages. Confirming messages involve acknowledgement of the bid and often a response in kind, such as support, expression of positive feelings, agreement, or nonverbal behaviors that indicate the partner is listening. In our own research, we found that whether wives were expressing complaints or compliments, if they had husbands who made a lot of eye contact while listening, their marital well-being was higher (Flora & Segrin, 2000). If it is the case that husbands’ eye contact communicates “I’m taking the time to be attentive to you,” then it may be cherished by wives because it nonverbally indicates the very opposite of withdrawal—involvement.

Instead of accepting a bid for attention, sometimes bids are ignored, for example, when partners are too preoccupied to notice the bid or too busy to respond. Worse yet, partners may deny a bid, by figuratively *turning against* the person with disconfirming, defensive, contradictory, critical, or sarcastic responses. At first glance, the process of making bids and responding to them is a seemingly minute and mundane part of relationship interaction. However, Gottman

and DeClaire (2001) argue that the emotional bidding/responding process is at the heart of intimacy.

Partner responsiveness first requires the ability and motivation to recognize and decode bids for attention, affection, and self-expression. This is not always an easy task. For example, when a partner expresses negative affect (e.g., frustration, anger, sadness), it is useful for spouses to be able to distinguish whether the negative affect is directed at them or not, i.e. when the negative affect stems from an outside source (e.g., work, school, or relationships with friends), the partner might simply be venting anger as a bid for support. As termed by Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2002b), *relational affect* refers to affect about the relationship (i.e., caused by the relationship), whereas *nonrelational affect* refers to affect caused by something outside the relationship. Husbands' marital satisfaction appears to be especially subject to their ability to decode nonrelational negative affect in their wives' messages (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002b). That is, when a husband recognizes that his wife's negative affect is caused by something outside the relationship rather than him, he is better poised to respond supportively rather than defensively. Koerner and Fitzpatrick also found that for both husbands and wives accurately decoding positive relational affect is associated with greater marital satisfaction. Koerner and Fitzpatrick explain that recognizing what is good allows a spouse to replicate that good behavior.

Along with decoding skills and turning toward a partner, offering support is a means of building intimacy. What kind of support is best and does the context matter? The typology of relationship maintenance behaviors that stems from Stafford et al.'s (2000) study on married couples lists advice as a relationship maintenance behavior. Does it matter if the advice is welcomed or not? Even though Cutrona and Suhr (1994) found that one of the most common ways spouses support each other is by offering advice, subsequent research has attempted to get at what kind of responses really are supportive and in what context. In the case of advice, Cutrona and her colleagues more recently found that "when people show vulnerability by admitting a need for direction," advice that contains any form of criticism or sarcasm is perceived as insensitive, not supportive (Cutrona, Shaffer, Wesner, & Gardner, 2007).

In analyses of different types of support offered in marriage (e.g., informational, emotional, esteem, or tangible support), esteem support and emotional support appear to be most consistently correlated with marital satisfaction (Brock & Lawrence, 2009; Xu & Burleson, 2004). Brock and Lawrence found any level of esteem support is positively related to marital quality for both husbands and wives. While there does not seem to be "too much of a good thing" with regard to esteem support, there can be "too much of a good thing" with regard to informational support (Brock & Lawrence, 2009, p. 181). Husbands who received more informational support than they desired from their wives experienced poorer marital quality. Naturally, it is difficult to listen to someone go on and on with informative advice—even children and teenagers resist this. Wives' marital quality was negatively affected by too much support in several forms: informational, tangible, and emotional support.

Are husbands and wives equally good at offering support? Neff and Karney (2005) found that husbands and wives seem to have similar, general abilities for offering support. In addition, husbands and wives perceive receiving similar levels of support from their spouses. However, husbands rated their wives as better support providers in response to their severe problems, in comparison to wives' ratings of their husbands. As Neff and Karney explained, wives appeared to time their support provision so that they responded with great support at the moments when husbands were most stressed. Wives did not necessarily receive the most support from their husbands in the times when they were the most stressed. Indeed, wives who were at the highest levels of stress reported that their husbands responded with negative behaviors. The results of this study may link to Koerner and Fitzpatrick's (2002b) findings that some husbands are not able to separate their wives' negative affect about an outside problem from negative affect that is directed at them.

People usually think of support as something that is offered in difficult, stressful times. But Gable, Gonzaga, and Strachman (2006) show that offering supportive responses to positive

event disclosures is linked to relationship well-being. When spouses share good things with their partners, partners have the opportunity to capitalize on positivity. Responding to good events with active enthusiasm demonstrates validation of a partner's strengths and caring.

Interdependent Behaviors: Joint Activities, Rituals, and Networks

Even though some models of intimacy consider the role of behavioral closeness, Reis and Patrick (1996) caution against using the concepts of intimacy and behavioral closeness interchangeably. Many relationships are behaviorally close relationships, but not necessarily intimate (e.g., spouses who live together but feel little intimacy). Nonetheless, behavioral closeness can create a context in which intimacy occurs. Stafford et al. (2000) report that spending time with shared social networks (e.g., shared friends) is a mechanism for relationship maintenance. Other researchers have found that time spent together in joint activities, particularly leisure activities, is positively related to relational satisfaction (Canary, Stafford, Hause, & Wallace, 1993). For example, Baldwin, Ellis, and Baldwin (1999) found that spouses who were both runners and ran together experienced above average marital satisfaction. However, as we discussed in chapter 3, not all joint activities are relationship-enhancing. The effect of joint activity on relationship satisfaction is moderated by social skills and positivity (Flora & Segrin, 1998), expectations regarding the activity (Flanagan et al., 2002), whether the activity is exciting and self-expanding versus boring or simply pleasant (Reissman, Aron, & Bergman, 1993), and whether the activity is interactive versus parallel or passive (Holman & Jacquart, 1988).

Shared rituals are a form of joint activity that hold the potential to be relationship-enhancing, depending on many of the moderating variables just listed. Gottman (1999) suggests that rituals are a way couples can create shared meaning, if the ritual represents something valued and positive in the relationship. Couples may have rituals for celebrating their anniversary (e.g., a weekend trip away to celebrate their relationship) or rituals for nursing a sick spouse back to health (e.g., making a favorite meal as a sign of support and care). In sum, there are many behavioral expressions of intimacy that spouses use either routinely or strategically to maintain their marriage.

Behaviors and Conflict

Maintaining any long-term intimate relationship requires partners to negotiate conflict (Bradbury & Karney, 1993; Gottman, 1993a). Because some level of conflict is practically a given, how couples deal with conflict is more telling than whether they experience conflict. Researchers have identified specific conflict patterns predictive of divorce, and these patterns are examined in detail in chapter 12. The present chapter examines how couples approach conflict in ways that sustain the marriage. It should be noted that even the best of marriages have times when partners interact in destructive ways. They reciprocate and escalate negative affect, criticize (personally attack) one another, express contempt, become defensive, or stonewall (i.e., emotionally withdraw) during conversation. But people in successful marriages seem to have mechanisms for curbing the destructive behaviors and increasing protective factors when dealing with conflict (Flanagan et al., 2002). What exactly are the best ways for couples to approach conflict? To this point, scientific research has revealed some general answers. However, marital therapists still face serious dilemmas because of mixed advice from researchers as well as many unanswered questions about marital conflict.

The Active Listening Model vs. Gottman's Approach

One example of mixed advice is the controversy surrounding the active listening model, otherwise known as the speaker-listener technique. Since its inception in the 1970s, the active

listening model has been highly influential in marital therapy. The active listening model involves using “I” statements versus “you” statements to express feelings during conflict. It also requires listeners to paraphrase and summarize the speaker’s feelings and message content and then to validate the speaker’s feelings. Active listening would sound like the following exchange:

Speaker: “I feel frustrated when I spend all my Saturday cleaning and you watch television.”

Listener: “It sounds like you feel like you are doing all the work. I can understand why this would make you upset. You’d like it if I spent more time helping you out.”

The active listening model is taught to couples as one part of the PREP program of marital therapy (Stanley, Blumberg, & Markman, 1999) (see chapter 17) and is used in numerous other marital therapies (Cornelius & Alessi, 2007). The hope is that active listening techniques will reduce negative affect and increase partner understanding. Indeed, there is some empirical evidence that active listening techniques reduce negativity, but even couples who have been trained to use active listening fail to enact the technique more than half the time (Cornelius & Alessi, 2007). In addition, even though feeling understood is theorized to promote intimacy, during marital conflict accurate understanding of a partner’s feelings and intent may not be a magic key to marital satisfaction, especially when the intent and feelings are accurately perceived as negative (Segrin, Hanzal, & Domschke, 2009). We discuss this idea in the section on perceptions later in the chapter.

The controversy over the active listening model spawned when Gottman, Coan, Carrère, and Swanson (1998) found in their own research that couples hardly used active listening during actual conflict, and when it was used, it predicted nothing with regard to marital happiness or stability. Gottman et al. went on to argue that it is unrealistic to ask a listener to be empathic when one feels attacked by the other. Gottman (1999) argues that a therapist may be able to actively listen to a client complaining about a third party, but for a spouse, active listening asks one to do “emotional gymnastics” at the very moment one feels emotionally attacked. Indeed, even though spouses say that listening without judgment is one way they maintain their relationships, Sillars, Roberts, Dun, and Leonard (2001) found that spouses rarely take their partner’s perspective during conflict. Even happy couples appear to respond in kind to negativity (e.g., they get angry and say what they feel in response) and forgo empathic responses to negativity. However, happy couples do not allow the negativity to escalate in a global way. That is, they do not harbor the conflict and let it seep into other areas of the marriage. Instead, they soon deescalate the negativity, perhaps with an idiosyncratic repair attempt or a gesture of compromise. Other researchers, such as Stanley, Bradbury, and Markman (2000), counter that Gottman has overstated the case, and the active listening model has merit, even if it is tough for couples to perform. Stanley et al. also take issue with the methodology of Gottman’s research. In particular, they feel that Gottman makes claims about the active listening model without measuring it accurately. More recently, some researchers have questioned how generalizable the approach is that Gottman suggests as an alternative to the active listening model (Kim, Capaldi, & Crosby, 2007).

So what does Gottman propose instead of active listening? Gottman’s approach emphasizes some of the following specific tactics (Gottman et al., 1998; Hafen & Crane, 2007):

- (1) Initiating conflict in gentle ways (i.e., “softened start-up”) and using complaints that avoid personal attacks
- (2) Deescalating negativity by avoiding destructive behaviors such as criticism (i.e., personally attacking the partner), defensiveness, expressions of contempt, and stonewalling (i.e., avoiding)

- (3) Viewing anger as an emotion that is not bad, if expressed without the above destructive behaviors, and recognizing that the suppression of anger may make things smooth in the short-term but difficult in the long-term
- (4) Soothing oneself physiologically (i.e., taking time out to decrease one's heart rate), rather than becoming emotionally flooded
- (5) Accepting influence and compromising (especially important for husbands)

Minus the confusion for marital therapists, there may be an up side to the controversy. What the active listening model and Gottman's approach share is an understanding that emotions are critical in conflict. Emotions drive conflict and stem from conflict—they must be managed in order to constructively deal with conflict. The intent of the active listening model is to temper negative emotion so couples can discuss the problem at hand and attempt to understand each other. Similarly, Gottman's recommendations focus on avoiding destructive behaviors that cause emotional flooding and soothing one's own emotional state so couples can stay engaged in resolving conflict through apologies, compromise, or cognitive restructuring. The result is that this controversy catapults the role of emotion to center stage in the study of conflict, with increased attention to emotions such as anger, jealousy, hurt, and guilt (Guerrero & La Valley, 2006). Many of the disagreements between researchers and therapists are about *how* to manage emotions, what emotions are actually destructive, and how emotions are linked to conflict behaviors.

Managing Negative Affect in Conflict

Some couples start out on a rocky path because they enter their marriage with existing vulnerabilities (i.e., stable characteristics such as a personality trait) that make it difficult to manage negative emotions. For example, Hanzal and Segrin (2009) studied how negative affectivity, sometimes referred to as the personality trait of neuroticism, affects marital quality and the use of conflict behaviors. They found that husbands' and wives' own negative affectivity affected their own marital satisfaction, and wives' negative affectivity was also associated with their husbands' marital satisfaction. More specifically, negative affectivity affected the conflict resolution strategies that people turned to when faced with conflict, which then affected marital satisfaction. In the Hanzal and Segrin study, husbands and wives with less negative affectivity turned to a conflict resolution style that focused on positive problem solving (i.e., focusing on the problem at hand and trying to find mutually beneficial solutions) rather than other options such as conflict engagement (i.e., negativity, belligerence, verbal aggressiveness), compliance (i.e., not sticking up for the self), and withdrawal (i.e., shutting down and refusing to talk). Naturally, the spouses with less negative affectivity and more positive problem solving were more satisfied. It might be that people in successful marriages enter marriage with personalities that make them prone to deal with conflict more effectively. In the tradition of the active listening model and much of Gottman's work, it is also important to teach people specific strategies (even if they are not naturally predisposed to use them) that will help them manage negative affect. One of the probable reasons why the active listening model and Gottman's work have been so popular with lay people is because both offer specific strategies rather than just general advice to communicate more positively. People seem to be hungry for information about what to do, rather than only warnings about what not to do. Admittedly, positive and negative marital processes are distinct, and "attempts to eliminate negative states would not necessarily foster positive states" (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2002, p. 64; see also Gordon & Baucom, 2009). For example, there is conclusive evidence that the demand/withdrawal pattern of communication does not promote marital well-being (Christensen & Heavey, 1993; Eldridge, Sevier, Jones, Atkins, & Christensen, 2009). In this pattern, the person demanding nags, blames, accuses, and criticizes with high negative affect, while the other partner withdraws or becomes silent. But what is the alternative? The seminal Gottman et al. (1998) study

introduced the importance of softened start-up, or bringing up conflict and change requests gently. More recently, Mitnick, Heyman, Malik, and Slep (2009) revealed more about how change requests can be brought to a partner effectively. When husbands and wives asked their partners to change with language that used “you” (e.g., “You should . . .” or “I wish you would”), the request was more commonly met with immediate resistance. But when wives asked for change with requests that used “we” statements, immediate resistance was suppressed. Using “we” statements was a more effective strategy for suppressing immediate resistance than other commonly taught and seemingly logical strategies, such as making requests for change specific rather than general (Mitnick et al., 2009). The power behind a “we” request is that it promotes a sense of togetherness in the problem, and wives appeared to be especially fruitful at framing conflict in this way.

Successful couples have personalities and skill sets for dealing with conflict. But while personality and skills are crucial to conflict management, Sillars et al. (2004) argue that contextual factors should not be discounted. Some couples are so oppressed by their distressed relationship context that the best personality and skills cannot overcome the context. What is a concrete and easy to resolve conflict in the context of a nondistressed relationship may be a more profound and difficult to resolve issue in the context of a distressed relationship. Further, the relationship context changes over time. Noller and Feeney (2002) found that “less happy spouses make a concerted effort over the first year or so to create a more constructive climate of marital interaction. By the time two years of marriage have passed, however, they seem to revert to the more destructive patterns they used earlier” (p. 137). Finally, contextual factors, such as cultural preferences and norms for expressing negative affect, influence what spouses perceive as ideal skills for dealing with conflict (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001).

Solvable and Perpetual Conflicts

Gottman (1999) describes solvable and perpetual types of conflict. *Solvable* conflicts can be resolved, while perpetual conflicts are a part of a relationship forever. An example of a solvable conflict might be that each spouse’s office Christmas party is scheduled on the same night. With the right conflict resolution tactics, the couple may eventually come to a mutually agreeable decision. The married couples in Stafford et al.’s (2000) study reported that they maintained their relationships by using conflict resolution tactics such as: apologizing when they were wrong, cooperating to handle problems and disagreements, listening without judgment to one another, being understanding, patient, and forgiving. Observational research confirms that in some cases, couples do enact these behaviors when actually dealing with conflict. For example, Gottman (1999) has found that successful couples are more likely to: (1) use repair attempts, which could include offering apologies, (2) accept influence and suggestions from the spouse (especially from the wife), which requires some degree of listening to one’s partner, (3) compromise more, which involves cooperation, and (4) express less destructive negative affect (especially when starting up conflicts), which likely requires patience and forgiveness.

Perpetual conflicts are deeply rooted in disagreements over larger issues (e.g., values, roles, personality traits) and, as the term perpetual suggests, they resurface again and again in relationships and never get resolved. An example of a perpetual conflict is a couple experiencing value differences in how to raise their children. It should also be noted that what is a solvable conflict for one couple may be a perpetual conflict rooted in deeper issues for another. According to Gottman (1999), over half of problems in marriages are perpetual problems. Because most of these perpetual problems will not be resolved, Gottman advises that couples find ways to cope with these problems. Gottman and Silver (1999) say that some problems are “inevitably part of a relationship, much the same way chronic physical ailments are inevitable as you get older. They are like a trick knee, a bad back . . . we may not love these problems, but we are

able to cope with them, to avoid situations that worsen them, and to develop strategies and routines that help us deal with them” (p. 131).

Dealing with tough conflicts, according to Gottman, relies on a deep fix that is rooted in the strength of the marital friendship. Developing a strong marital friendship requires having strong mutual respect for and understanding of one another. Gottman (1999) explains that even successful couples do not overcome most perpetual problems, but their strong respect for one another encourages them to find ways to dialogue about the problems, understand why the differences exist (maybe even find humor in the differences), and discover ways to live with the differences so that both persons’ desires can be honored to some extent. Caughlin et al. (2000) are careful to clarify that successful couples do not necessarily *accommodate* to perpetual problems. That is, they do not just forget about the problem and try to be happy. Rather, they find ways to *endure* the problem when it surfaces, in a way that keeps the problem from escalating (e.g., by keeping open dialogue and humor about the issues).

An ugly alternative to the “respect” approach to perpetual problems is the “control” approach. In their research on relational control in marriage, Millar and Rogers (1988) (see also Rogers, 2001) define *one-up messages* (i.e., attempts to direct or assert rights), *one-down messages* (i.e., requests or acceptances of another’s control movements), and *one-across messages* (i.e., neutral messages). The higher the proportion of one-up messages, the more domineering a person is. However, being domineering does not lead to being dominant. Being dominant requires another to accept one’s control movements (i.e., match your one-ups with one-downs). Two spouses who issue a high proportion of one-up messages are both domineering, but neither is dominant. According to Rogers (2001), this battle of domineeringness leads to “an ongoing unsettledness over relational issues” (p. 27). There is an inverse relationship between domineeringness and marital and communication satisfaction, especially when wives are domineering. Couples who deal with perpetual problems by constantly trying to control and change the other in a domineering way, rather than compromise, only exacerbate the perpetual problem.

Relationship Repair

Successful couples have another critical ability—that is to effectively repair a relationship when expressions of negative affect get out of control and exceed the negative threshold (Gottman, 1999). Spouses who experience more marital commitment are motivated to engage in more repair attempts (Brandau-Brown & Ragsdale, 2008). Gottman explains that a repair attempt “can be almost anything, but it is generally the spouses acting as their own therapist. They comment on the communication itself, or they support and soothe one another, or they express appreciations to soften their complaints” (Gottman, 1999, p. 48). Other ways of soothing negative affect during conflict may include apologizing or expressing interest, humor, or affection (Gottman et al., 1998). Ultimately, effective repair attempts are difficult to define, because they tend to be very idiosyncratic to the couple. For example, breaking up a tense, conflictual moment with humor may work with one couple but infuriate another. Dunleavy, Goodboy, Booth-Butterfield, Sidelinger, and Banfield (2009) found that spouses perceive silence as ineffective at repairing a relationship. Further, when trying to repair the damage from a hurtful message, spouses report that they are most likely to attempt to repair things by justifying their hurtful message. But the effectiveness of this strategy is suspect because justifications externalize the issue unlike apologies, where blame is accepted (Dunleavy et al., 2009, p. 78).

PERCEPTION AND RELATIONSHIP MAINTENANCE

An impressive amount of research has explored how marital success is related to certain types of perceptions spouses make about the marriage and the behaviors within it. Among other

things, perceptions influence how spouses maintain intimacy and process conflict. In this section, we explore (1) how perceptual accuracy and inaccuracy may both work to sustain relationships, (2) how couples' perceptions about the relationship are revealed in the way they talk about their relationship, and (3) how certain perceptions of sacrifice and forgiveness benefit relationships. The thesis for this section is as follows: The perceptions of successful couples are characterized by positivity on a global level, but, successful couples do not necessarily practice a positive bias that is blind to all specific instances of negative behavior in the marriage.

The Debate: Perceptual Inaccuracy vs. Accuracy

Gordon and Baucom (2009) argue that successful couples capitalize on *positive affectivity*, or positive emotional experiences (Gordon & Baucom, 2009). They name three specific cognitive and behavioral traits that contribute to positive affectivity: higher levels of optimism, adaptive coping skills, and personal expansion. These three traits are related to higher overall levels of positive affectivity for both spouses, and positive affectivity is related to higher marital satisfaction for both spouses.

Optimism refers to “one’s tendency to possess positive expectations for one’s future” (Gordon & Baucom, 2009, p. 423). Like Gordon and Baucom, other researchers also suggest that some marital therapies would do well to focus on creating positive expectations for the relationship. This strategy seems foolish when negative expectations are actually accurate predictions. However, Sanford (2006) found that even after controlling for accurate expectations, changing one’s expectations changes communication behavior. As Sanford says, “A person with negative expectancies for partner understanding may enter a conversation prepared to engage in self-protective, attacking, and defensive behaviors” (2006, p. 263). As for the second factor that leads to positive affectivity, Gordon and Baucom (2009) define *adaptive coping skills* as the ability to positively reframe stressors, make plans for how to deal with stressors, and take active steps toward coping. Finally, *personal expansion* is achieved when individual spouses find ways to engage in novel activities or augment their expertise or experience with an activity.

The focus on positivity and, likewise, biased, benevolent perceptions needs to be discussed with attention to an ongoing debate among relationship researchers. McNulty and Karney (2004) summarize the debate as follows: “One line of research suggests that positive expectations lead to positive outcomes. . . In contrast, another line of research suggests that positive expectations lead to disappointment” (p. 729). Is it possible to positively think yourself into a good marital relationship? And if so, is that productive? It seems that overly positive illusions and vast perceptual departures from reality can put spouses at risk when they fail to recognize negative behavior. Very recent research has explored whether accurate (i.e., realistic) perceptions versus inaccurate but benevolent perceptions about one’s partner are better for the good of the relationship. This is important work, and even though many of these studies have still resulted in some conflicting conclusions, a more complex picture is emerging to suggest that there is a time and place for both perceptual accuracy and inaccuracy.

The Benefits of Perceptual Inaccuracy

Decades ago, researchers conducting important work on topics such as attributions, sentiment override, and cognitive editing first noticed that successful couples’ perceptions of their intimate relationships do not match reality. Marital researchers began to look at *attributions*, or perceptions people form about the reasons or causes of another person’s behavior. Spouses can offer different kinds of attributions. Causal attributions answer what produced a behavior. Some of the primary causal attributions that researchers have addressed are whether a cause

can be viewed as *internally motivated* versus *externally motivated*, *stable* (i.e., an enduring personality trait) versus *unstable* (i.e., a one-time situational cause), or *global* (i.e., touching the relationship in a far-reaching global way) versus *specific* (i.e., affecting just one specific area of the relationship) (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Fincham & Bradbury, 1991). The general conclusion of much of this research was that spouses in satisfying marriages are more likely to offer internal, stable, and global attributions for positive spousal behaviors, and external, unstable, and specific attributions for negative spousal behaviors. For example, a satisfied wife may attribute her husband's motivation to give her flowers (a positive behavior) to internal (e.g., "he's such a thoughtful guy"), stable (e.g., "he always does nice things like this for me"), or global causes (e.g., "this gift is a symbol of how much he cares about our relationship"). For a wife in a different marriage, an offering of flowers may be perceived as her husband's inadequate attempt to put a quick-fix on a recurring problem.

Responsibility attributions address whether a person behaved according to appropriate expectations. Although responsibility and causal attributions have both received attention, responsibility attributions appear to be especially pivotal to perceptions of marital conflict (Davey, Fincham, Beach, & Brody, 2001). Davey et al. (2001) illustrate how a responsibility attribution can compound a negative causal attribution to explain an event (p. 721). When a spouse comes home late from work, the other spouse may make a causal attribution (e.g., "she didn't keep track of time again"), followed by a responsibility attribution (e.g., "she only thinks about herself and her own needs"), which puts an additional sting on the conflict.

In 1980, Weiss introduced the concept of *sentiment override*, described as a phenomenon in which "spouses' responses to a partner behavior are determined largely by their general sentiment toward the partner rather than by anything about the behavior itself" (Fincham, Bradbury, & Scott, 1990, p. 139). For example, a spouse's positive sentiment toward the relationship in general (e.g., their overall relationship satisfaction) could cloud perceptions of a partner's specific negative behavior (e.g., a criticism or lack of engagement), so the behavior is perceived as less severe or overlooked. This could then decrease the spouse's desire to reciprocate and escalate negativity in a marriage, because there presumably is little or no negativity to reciprocate in the spouse's biased mind (Hawkins, Carrere, & Gottman, 2002; Notarius, Benson, Sloane, Vanzetti, & Hornyak, 1989). In our own research, we found compelling evidence to suggest that spouses do not interpret complaints from their partner so negatively when they have an overall positive sentiment toward the relationship (Flora & Segrin, 2000).

Spouses have also been found to engage in *cognitive editing*, a process slightly different from the sentiment override effect. In the case of editing, spouses are not necessarily biased in their immediate perceptions of a behavior, but when they later think about what happened, they "edit out" the negative behavior in a way that is consistent with their overall feelings toward the relationship (Gottman & Notarius, 2002; Notarius et al., 1989). Later on, the spouses remember only the edited version of the interaction. They remember what they want to remember. Examples of cognitive editing include denial, embellishment, or selective abstraction. In cognitive editing, a remark may be accurately perceived, but ignored. In sentiment override, however, the negative remark would be inaccurately perceived in the first place to match the spouses' existing positive or negative feelings toward the relationship.

More research provides evidence that some types of *inaccurate* decoding benefit relationships. For example, in their two-year longitudinal study, Noller and Feeney (2002) found that wives who were satisfied with their marriage early in the study tended to be less accurate at decoding their husband's negative message throughout the course of the study. The wives did not interpret their husbands' negative messages to be as negative as an unbiased observer did. The inaccurate decoding, marked by optimistic attributions and perceptions, seemed to buffer negativity in the marriage.

More recently, Segrin, Hanzal, and Domschke (2009) delivered another message to substantiate the rewards of the benevolent perceptual inaccuracy. One goal of their study was to examine whether marital satisfaction was related to accurate perceptions or benevolent perceptions about how partners communicate during conflict. When spouses made benevolent perceptions of their partners' conflict style (e.g., they saw their spouses as engaging in more constructive behaviors, like positive problem solving, and fewer destructive behaviors, like hostile engagement and withdrawal), both their own and their partners' marital satisfaction was higher. However, marital satisfaction was not linked to accurate perceptions of a partner's conflict style. These findings suggest that, at least in the domain of marital conflict, benevolent perceptions may trump the effect of accurate perceptions.

The Limits to Perceptual Inaccuracy

It should be noted, however, that McNulty and Karney (2004) discovered some boundary conditions for the benefits of positive bias or benevolent inaccuracy. To begin with, they noticed that the benefits of positive bias show up in the short term for most couples, but hold in the long term only if the positive bias can be confirmed. For example, they found that after four years, holding positive expectations about a relationship was "beneficial to the extent that [the expectations] were realistic (i.e., held by the partners who possessed the skills to confirm them) and predicted steeper declines in relationship satisfaction to the extent that they were less realistic (i.e., held by partners who lacked sufficient relationship skills to confirm them)" (McNulty & Karney, 2004, p. 739). Thus the extent to which the positive expectations and bias could be confirmed or disconfirmed played a pivotal role in future satisfaction.

Another boundary condition might be whether the positive bias occurs in a global or specific perception. For example, Neff and Karney (2005) found different effects for global perceptions (e.g., believing your partner is a really great guy) versus specific perceptions (e.g., believing your partner made the right decision at work today). Successful couples appeared to form global perceptions about their partner that were positively biased or enhanced. But these same successful couples made specific perceptions that were accurate, not positively biased. Perhaps accuracy and inaccuracy are important, but at different levels. As Neff and Karney (2005) argue, specific attributions may "trickle up" to form global perceptions. The hope is that enough specific, positive, and accurate perceptions will build up to substantiate the more global positively enhanced perceptions. "A love without an accurate view of the partners' specific qualities . . . may be fragile. Global adoration lacking in specific accuracy not only leaves the spouses vulnerable to disappointment as their partners' faults surface over the course of the relationship but also may lead partners to doubt the credibility of their spouses' love" (Neff & Karney, 2005, p. 495).

Another limiting condition relates to how severe the negative problems are in a relationship. It is a lot easier and more productive to overlook small negatives than major relationship transgressions and serious, ongoing problems. This is exactly what McNulty, O'Mara, and Karney (2008) found. The clever title of their study plays off a popular cultural phrase: "Don't Sweat the Small Stuff. . . But It Is Not All Small Stuff." They found that when spouses in "troubled" marriages thought benevolently about their problems, they experienced steep declines in marital satisfaction. These spouses seemed to have an unrealistic optimism about their serious problems. The unfortunate twist for these couples was that failure to acknowledge severe or ongoing problems shored up little motivation to deal with the problems. As McNulty et al. summarize, these spouses then left their problems alone only to worsen over time. On the other hand, spouses who were in "healthy" marriages benefited from making positively biased perceptions about their less severe and smaller problems. McNulty et al. (2008) end with the conclusion that spouses might do best to "enhance themselves on dimensions that are already relatively positive to begin with . . . [rather than] enhance themselves on dimensions that are more negative" (p. 644).

Revealing Perceptions: Oral Histories of Marriage

When researchers listen to couples talk about events and feelings surrounding their marriage, it is difficult to separate what really happened and what did not happen from the cognitive bias inherent in attributions, sentiment override effects, and biased editing processes. Depending on a researcher's goal, it is not always necessary to untangle the objective from the subjective when studying a marriage. In many cases, knowing how spouses *view* their marriage is most important.

There is a story behind every marriage. This story might include details of how the couple first met, what they did on their first date, when they decided to get married, and memories of the good times and bad times in their marriage. When people tell the story of their marriage, they often unwittingly reveal insights into their fondness for their partner, their philosophy of a good marriage, and the extent to which they have developed a shared identity as a "couple." Even more impactful, the way married couples view their past is often in line with their current level of satisfaction and predictive of their future marital stability and satisfaction (Buehlman et al., 1992; Flora & Segrin, 2003; Segrin & Flora, 2001). Using a technique called the Oral History Interview (Krokoff, 1984), couples are asked a series of general open-ended questions about their marriages. Recordings of these interviews are then analyzed for various themes that are evident in the way the couples individually and jointly talk about their marriage. Couples who are most satisfied and stable in their marriage are those who express a strong marital bond when telling the story of their past. The strength of the marital bond is evident in themes that express high *fondness and affection* (i.e., pride, compliments, and affection), high *we-ness* (i.e., indications of spousal unity), high *expansiveness* (i.e., elaboration about the partner and marriage), low *negativity* (i.e., criticisms or lack of compliments), low *disappointment* (i.e., disillusionment in the marriage), low *chaos* (i.e., unexpected, out of control problems), and high *glorifying the struggle* (i.e., recognizing hard times but feeling good about working through them). Memories about one's relationship past can change over time. Sometimes people can also revise their stories and memories in response to changes in satisfaction.

In a study of newlywed couples, Frye and Karney (2004) found that bias in relationship memories is common, but the bias does not always persist over time. Their study was unique in that it compared how spouses retrospectively report on their relationships at multiple points in time. Every 6 months, spouses reported their memories of relationship change. Then at the end of the 2½ year study, spouses reported their memories of relationship change over each 6 month period again. This allowed Frye and Karney to compare how memories change over time. Contrary to the notion that memory in general becomes more distorted over time, Frye and Karney discovered that newlywed couples' memories about the recent past (the last 6 months) were more positively biased than memories about the more distant past. Memories of the recent past were biased such that they remembered more relationship improvement in the recent time period. Frye and Karney explain that spouses likely benefit from perceptions that they are improving, and that the improvement is recent. Perceptions of recent improvement probably impact current satisfaction in more robust ways than what happened in the past. The here and now matters to people, and it might be easier for people to face the past in a realistic way if they perceive that things are good and in fact improving in the present.

Sacrifice and Forgiveness

Researchers who study sacrifice and forgiveness bring up tough questions about how far spouses should go in putting the interests of the partner first or extending a benevolent response after a partner's transgression. With regard to sacrifice, Popenoe (2007) argues that marriage should be more about sacrifice for the communal good rather than self-fulfillment. However, many

feminist scholars “have been critical of sacrifice, suggesting that it sets the stage for ‘codependency,’ relationship dissatisfaction, and depression” (Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005, p. 327). In a study on the daily sacrifices that spouses make, Impett et al. (2005) examined spouses’ motivation to sacrifice. Distinguishing between kinds of motivation, they found that when people are motivated by approach reasons, sacrifice is beneficial for relationships (i.e., participants have higher relationship quality and life satisfaction and less relationship conflict). Approach motives involve sacrifice to achieve a positive state (e.g., to make a partner happy), whereas avoidance motives are about avoiding a negative state (e.g., to avoid conflict or disappointing a spouse). Impett et al. have made important inroads into understanding daily sacrifices. They acknowledge that there are still many unanswered questions about how spouses handle larger and more complex sacrifices, such as relocating for one spouse’s job or accepting caretaking duties for members of the partner’s family.

Just as sacrifice is a multidimensional concept, forgiveness has at least two dimensions (Fincham & Beach, 2002). The negative dimension “involves the degree to which an individual continues to hold grudges, withdraws from the relationship, and desires revenge or punishment against the partner for a past betrayal” (Gordon, Hughes, Tomcik, Dixon, & Litzinger, 2009, p. 1). The positive dimension “involves the degree to which an individual experiences a readiness to forgive, an increase in empathy, and a release from anger” (Gordon et al., 2009, p. 1). Avoidance motives and revenge motives are often behind negative forgiveness, while approach motives and attitudes of goodwill drive positive forgiveness (Fincham & Beach, 2002). For those spouses who continue their relationship after the transgression, motivations for forgiveness are related to marital communication. Negative communication has been found to predict psychological aggression and poorer conflict resolution, while positive forgiveness appears to predict better conflict resolution, even longitudinally (Fincham & Beach, 2002, 2007; Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004). Because positive forgiveness is theorized to release one from anger, forgiveness may facilitate fewer hostile conflict interactions in the present and future. However, only an individual can decide whether to extend positive forgiveness for a relational transgression, and in cases of major relationship transgressions such decisions are especially difficult.

COUPLE TYPES

Successful marriages are capable of regulating “rich climates of positivity in the marriage,” but often “very different, rich climates” (Gottman, 1999, p. 88). The systems theory concept of equifinality suggests that there is more than one way to achieve a similar end state. Separate programs of research by Gottman and Fitzpatrick have identified various types of couples, who differ in many regards but are all reasonably capable of making marriage work. In addition to studying Gottman’s and Fitzpatrick’s couple types, we also explore other types of couples in this section: gay and lesbian couples and long-term married couples.

Gottman’s Couple Types

Gottman and his colleagues have identified three types of couples: Volatile, Validating, and Conflict-avoiding couples (1994). Each couple type maintains a relationship climate in which positivity outweighs negativity, but they achieve this climate in different ways. The couple types differ in the way they exert influence, resolve conflict, and communicate about emotions (see Table 6.3). Still, each couple type can have a stable marriage.

Gottman uses the term “mismatches” to describe marriages in which spouses are different types (e.g., a Volatile spouse with a Conflict-avoiding partner). The term mismatch hints at Gottman’s feeling that these spouses are not well-suited for one another. The adjustments they will be required to make in order to make the marriage work will be very difficult.

Table 6.3 Gottman's Volatile, Validating, and Conflict-avoiding couples

Volatile couples:

These spouses are the most emotionally expressive of the three types. They fiercely value openness and honesty. Their strong expressions of both negative and positive emotion prompt them to disagree passionately, but soon reaffirm their relationship and the other's personality with positive expressions of affection, humor, or teasing. In order to achieve a climate richer in positivity rather than negativity, the many disagreements they lift up are met with large amounts of positive affect. This ratio keeps spouses from feeling hurt by negative emotional expressions, and they in fact foster a great deal of romance in the relationship. Disagreements are often interpreted as signs of involvement and caring. Both partners are likely to bring up issues and influence the other early on in discussions, and neither withdraws. Spouses appreciate the individual expression in their union and see it as the glue that holds them together.

Validating couples:

These spouses are more moderate in their emotional expressions. Though they can become very emotionally expressive, they do so only concerning very important issues, and they usually consider the timing of their emotional expressions. Spouses are careful to initiate their complaints in a softened way. If necessary, they become increasingly expressive as the conversation continues. However, they pride themselves on ending a conversation or influence attempt by solving a problem in a way that benefits the couple as a team. Validating couples view themselves as a team, and they place a premium on companionship and togetherness.

Conflict-avoiding couples:

These spouses attempt to minimize or even completely avoid conflicts. Rather than spending time disagreeing, they focus on the areas of their relationship that reflect shared beliefs and solidarity. They may compromise or agree to disagree because their primary goal of accepting the other supercedes conflicts. As Gottman describes, any forms of emotional expressions by the Conflict-avoiding couple are usually "low-key" and "tempered." Conflict-avoiding couples are sometimes falsely accused of lacking the insight or ability to deal with conflict. To the contrary, Conflict-avoiding couples may be so empathic about their partner and relationship that they take great care to build solidarity and accept their partners as they are.

Note. From Gottman, J.M. (1994). *What predicts divorce: The relationship between marital processes and marital outcomes*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. Adapted with permission.

Gottman claims that mismatched partners enter marriage with a heightened frequency and intensity of perpetual problems. They struggle to overcome disagreements about when and how to exert influence, resolve conflict, and communicate about emotions. Gottman (1999) describes a likely scenario in a match of a Conflict-avoider and a Volatile: "the avoider quickly feels that he or she has married an out-of-control crazy person. The volatile believes that he or she has married a cold fish and feels unloved, rejected and unappreciated" (p. 96).

Fitzpatrick's Couple Types

Prior to Gottman's work on marital types, Fitzpatrick and her colleagues (Fitzpatrick, 1984, 1988a) introduced a well-developed and validated marital typology. The typology developed from an understanding of basic dimensions in marriage, some of which Gottman later used to define his stable couple types. The three bipolar dimensions include a *conventional versus non-conventional* relationship ideology, *interdependence versus autonomy*, and *conflict avoidance versus conflict engagement*. Fitzpatrick developed the Relational Dimensions Instrument (RDI), whereby spouses can individually report their tendencies across these dimensions. Depending upon results of the RDI, individuals may be defined by one of three types: Traditional, Independent, or Separate (see Table 6.4). In 1994, Gottman compared his couple types to Fitzpatrick's "pure" types, pointing out several similarities between Traditionals and Validating couples, Independent and Volatile couples, and Separate and Conflict-avoiding couples.

Fitzpatrick reports that of the more than 1000 couples who have taken the RDI over the years, about 60% of couples have spouses who are matched in their marital orientation

Table 6.4 Fitzpatrick's Traditional, Independent, and Separate couples

Traditionals:

These couples value stability and hold to conventional relational ideologies and customs (e.g., the woman takes the man's last name, infidelity is inexcusable, gender roles are traditional, relational stability is preferred over relational change). They are highly interdependent, as evident by their frequent sharing, companionship, and regulated time together (e.g., scheduled meal times). They are likely to be expressive and engage in conflict when the issue is serious, though in a cooperative rather than assertive way.

Independents:

These couples hold very nonconventional values about relationships (e.g., believing the relationship should not constrain individual freedom and should exhibit novelty). They are highly interdependent in their emotional connection, though they may maintain separate physical spaces and lack the timed routines that characterize Traditionals. Independents are very expressive, report some assertiveness, and embrace conflict.

Separates:

These couples espouse ambivalent relational ideologies, often supporting traditional marriage and family values, but simultaneously supporting the individual freedom and ideology of change and uncertainty that Independents uphold. Sometimes the public and private behavior of Separates is contradictory (e.g., they may publicly support conventional relationship values, but privately behave in an unconventional way). Separates are not very expressive with one another. They maintain emotional and physical space from their spouses as they find emotional support outside the marriage. The little interdependence Separates have may be expressed through regulated time together. They avoid open marital conflicts.

Note. Adapted from Fitzpatrick (1984, 1988a).

(e.g., both are Traditionals). Fitzpatrick terms these couples "pure" types. Of the 60% pure types, each of the three pure types is represented similarly, at around 20%. The remaining 40% are termed "mixed" types (e.g., the wife is Traditional and the husband is Separate). Of the variety of mixed types that exist, none seems to appear more frequently than the others.

Years of research have validated that the couple types differ in their use of power, conflict strategies, self-disclosure, communication of emotions, expectations, marital satisfaction, and commitment (see Douglas, 1999 and Givertz, Segrin, & Hanzal, 2009). Although Fitzpatrick (1988a) stresses that each couple type can represent a satisfying, functional marriage, she and others have found levels of satisfaction to be slightly higher among Traditionals and lowest among Separates (Douglas, 1999; Fitzpatrick & Best, 1979; Givertz et al., 2009). Most recently, Givertz et al. (2009) explored differences in commitment among the three couple types, finding that Separates and Traditionals differed the most. Traditionals were high in dedication commitment, namely a dedication to a traditional value system, and low in constraint commitment (i.e., they were not staying together just because of external constraints such as financial pressure, social pressure, or few other available partners). Traditionals also had the highest satisfaction of the three types, even though their satisfaction was not driven by whether they received personal rewards from their relationship. Separates had the lowest dedication commitment and personal commitment and the highest constraint commitment. Givertz et al. concluded that the commitment of the Traditional couple appears to be driven more by ideology and less by their actual satisfaction with the marriage. In contrast, Separate couples' commitment seems to be more directly linked to how satisfied they are with the marriage (i.e., they remain committed to their marriage because they are satisfied by it).

Gay and Lesbian Couples

Fitzpatrick's and Gottman's research on couple types is highly influential, in part, because of the awareness it raises about the variety of ways in which intimate partnerships can work. Along with studying diversity in relationship processes, family scholars also have interest in the

diversity of *people* in intimate partnerships. Research on same-sex partnerships indicates many similarities to heterosexual couples, but also some important differences.

Relationship Quality

Although there is considerable evidence to indicate that homosexual couples report similar levels of relationship satisfaction and commitment as compared to heterosexual couples (Kurdek, 1995, 1998a, 2000), Kurdek (2008a) recently found that lesbian partners report slightly higher relationship quality, as compared to gay partners, heterosexual couples with no children, and heterosexual couples with children. Further, in an analysis of changes in relationship quality over the first 10 years as a couple, the relationship quality of lesbian and gay partners who stayed together remained fairly stable as compared to heterosexual couples with and without children, who experienced a more notable drop in relationship quality. Kurdek (2008a) explains two reasons why the relationship quality of lesbian and gay partners may appear to be higher and/or remain more stable. First, gay and lesbian couples seem to exhibit more expressiveness, which may relate to higher relationship quality. Second, lesbian and gay partners do not have legal barriers to leaving their relationships, so those partners who stay together might be the happy ones who are drawn to positive relationship qualities that remain fairly stable over time. Scientifically, this is known as a “survival effect.”

Relationship Processes

Kurdek (2004, 2006, 2008b) also argues that the processes that drive relational satisfaction and commitment are generally similar among heterosexual, gay, and lesbian relationships, but there are a few notable differences. These processes include factors such as personality traits, perceptions of support, conflict resolution skills, and relationship maintenance behaviors. Haas and Stafford (2005) discovered that married and same-sex partners both reported “sharing tasks” as the most commonly used maintenance behavior. There were some differences, such that same-sex partners engaged in more meta-relational communication. In other words, they spent more time taking the pulse of the relationship and talking about how the relationship was going. As Haas and Stafford explain, without legal parameters around the relationship to create a bond or barrier, same-sex couples may feel the need to keep the status of the relationship in check. Compared to same-sex couples, married couples relied more heavily on positivity in the form of humor, favors, and gifts to maintain the relationship.

There are some small but interesting differences in intimacy levels and conflict patterns among heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples. It may be that the gender of the relational partners drives some of these differences. In addressing this question, Kurdek (1998a) found that lesbian partners reported more intimacy in their relationships than married, heterosexual couples (Kurdek, 1998a). To explain the greater intimacy in lesbian relationships, Kurdek (1998a) says that if females are socialized to define themselves in terms of their relationships more than males, then lesbian relationships may benefit from a “double-dose of relationship enhancing influences” (p. 554).

Kurdek (1998a) also tested the hypothesis that same-sex couples would exhibit more constructive problem solving than married, heterosexual couples, because same-sex couples approach problems from the same gender perspective. Contrary to his hypothesis, same-sex couples did not differ from married couples in problem solving abilities. Kurdek (1994) has also found gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples fight about similar topics (i.e., most commonly intimacy and power) and with similar frequency.

For many researchers, studying homosexual couples provides a way to see whether differences between partners in heterosexual relationships can be attributed to gender differences or role differences (Nussbaum, 2000). With regard to the same-sex couples in Kurdek’s (1998a) study, constructive problem solving appeared to be more related to factors such as conflict

resolution styles or investment in the conflict, rather than gender differences. In a more specific, observational study of communication and conflict behavior in same-sex couples, Gottman et al. (2003) found that compared to heterosexual couples, same-sex couples start off their conversations with more positivity, the positivity has more impact, and the negativity has less impact. Patterns of demand/withdrawal were also less likely among same-sex couples. However, same-sex couples in the study were not as successful at repairing a negative situation once it began to escalate. In explaining their results, Gottman et al. stressed that values of equality common to many same-sex couples may be the real beneficial agent in processing conflict.

One fairly reliable difference in the relationship processes between heterosexual couples and gay and lesbian couples involves the division of household labor (Kurdek, 2005). In heterosexual relationships, wives still perform a majority of household tasks aligned with traditional gender stereotypes. Same-sex couples do not take on role relationships according to sex, as some heterosexual couples do. Household labor is more equitable for lesbian and gay couples. However, gay couples are more likely to achieve that equity with each partner specializing in various household tasks, whereas lesbian couples tend to trade off in task performance (Kurdek, 2007).

Clearly, a major difference between heterosexual and homosexual couples is the lack of institutional and social support for homosexual relationships (Kurdek, 2004). The implications of this difference are far-reaching. In a majority of states, same-sex marriages are not legally recognized. Couples in such unions do not have access to privileges available to married couples, such as inheritance, medical decisions, insurance, taxes, or property transfers. Because most same-sex relationships are not recognized civil unions, there are fewer support systems and barriers to relationship dissolution. Indeed, same-sex couples have significantly higher dissolution rates (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Kurdek 1998a), although dissolution rates are similar between gay and lesbian relationships (Kurdek, 2003).

Systems that provide support, however, can also impart stress. Same-sex couples may be relieved of some of the stressors that partners in dissolving heterosexual relationships face (e.g., divorce costs). With a lack of institutional barriers to dissolution, Kurdek (1998a) comments that it is remarkable that as many homosexual couples remain together as long as they do. He emphasizes that same-sex couples must find creative ways to make their relationship succeed in the face of a sometimes hostile social environment. Some of these creative coping mechanisms may involve carefully redefining one's own extended family to include other supportive friends or cognitive processing that involves glorifying the struggle and adjusting expectations (Kurdek, 2005). In one of their first studies on relationship maintenance behaviors in gay and lesbian relationships, Haas and Stafford (1998) found that shared networks were particularly important mechanisms—even more important than for heterosexual couples. Merging the partners' social networks and becoming involved with one another's family and friends symbolized coming out and public commitment to the relationship. In a supportive context, making an invisible relationship visible can garner support. Rituals that heterosexual couples have for garnering support (e.g., engagements, marriage ceremonies) are not as common for homosexual couples.

Long-term Married Couples

This chapter is focused on how couples sustain their marriages, and so it is important to examine those efforts over the long-term. Carstensen, Gottman, and Levenson (1995) found that compared to middle-aged couples (mean age 44 for husbands and 43 for wives), older couples (mean age 64 for husbands and 62 for wives) displayed (1) less negative affect (e.g., anger, disgust, belligerence, and whining) and (2) more affection. Regarding negative affect, it is difficult to tell if older couples have less severe marital problems or are simply less emotionally engaged in their problems. In an examination of responsive listening behaviors in

middle-aged versus long-term marriages, happy older couples and happy middle-aged couples both displayed more positive and less negative emotional expressions while listening than their unhappy counterparts (Pasupathi, Carstensen, Levenson, & Gottman, 1999). However, happy older couples avoided eye contact and did not backchannel as much when dealing with conflict as did happy middle-aged couples. Still, these less responsive listening behaviors did not take a toll on the intimacy and marital satisfaction of older couples. As the researchers suggest, “as conflicts become more and more familiar, the listening spouse in a conflict conversation must provide less evidence for having heard and understood the speaking spouse’s statements. . . It may be that when happy older couples avoid eye contact and do not backchannel, they actually avoid escalating a conflict” (Pasupathi et al., 1999, p. 187). Indeed, Caughlin (2002) found that in some marriages that last beyond 10 years, satisfaction is actually enhanced over time when husbands withdraw from their wives’ demands. This finding contradicts the typical conclusions regarding the pattern termed demand–withdrawal. Caughlin explains, however, that in long-term marriages, the demand–withdrawal pattern may be dissatisfying at the current moment, but it may help avoid the escalation of problems that could take a toll on future satisfaction.

What about Carstensen et al.’s (1995) discovery of more affection in longer-term marriages? In their qualitative study of 20 older married couples, Dickson and Walker (2001) concur that many husbands become more emotionally expressive over time. Compared to their wives, later-life husbands were more emotionally expressive, more open and willing to talk about their relationship, and more validating when their wives talked about the relationship. Overall, most people in long-term marriages report being happy with their marriages—usually happier with them in later life than in midlife (Goodman, 1999). However, this may be due in part to the fact that many of the unhappy marriages were dissolved earlier. It appears that many, though not all, of the same behaviors that promoted intimacy earlier in a marriage still promote intimacy later in marriage (Cooney & Dunne, 2001).

Finally, when Henry, Miller, and Giarrusso (2005) asked married partners (with an average age of 69) to report the things they “have differed, disagreed, or been disappointed about” in the last few years, several themes emerged. The three most common themes were leisure activities, intimacy, and financial matters. Henry et al. explain that long-term couples experience fewer family and work demands and more leisure time. Couples often disagree about how to spend that time or how to adjust to living with a spouse who once worked and has newfound time at home. The second most common theme was intimacy. This involved negotiating physical intimacy as well as maintaining emotional intimacy. The third theme was financial matters related to limited incomes and decisions about how to distribute financial resources to children.

CONCLUSION

Commensurate with the interest in the companionate nature of marriage, researchers over the last 30–40 years have sought to understand the interpersonal processes that characterize successful, intimate partnerships. Researchers emphasize that the behaviors and cognitions of partners are pivotal and intricately tied with one another. The ability to regulate these domains so they do not exceed negative thresholds is undoubtedly one of the toughest challenges couples face. Spouses must regulate an array of behaviors, including behaviors that build intimacy as well as behaviors used to negotiate conflict. Those couples that succeed appear to foster intimacy through (1) skillful self-disclosure and expression of affection, (2) being responsive, supportive, and demonstrating knowledge of one’s partner, and (3) engaging in meaningful joint activities and rituals. Although there are a variety of ways to negotiate conflict, successful couples maintain (1) an ability to deescalate negative affect, (2) respect for one another that allows them to maintain dialogue about tough problems, and (3) a willingness to apologize, compromise, and repair mistakes.

The fact that spouses' behaviors are so intricately tied to cognitions means that spouses are constantly mentally processing the behaviors they exchange. Successful couples nurture a culture of positivity by exercising benevolent, but often biased, perceptions of their spouses' behavior. These biases are reflected in positive attributions, positive sentiment override, and cognitive editing. Everyday talk as well as the stories couples tell about their relationship reveal these perceptions. Other ways spouses maintain their relationship are through sacrifices that reflect teamwork and forgiveness that stems from goodwill toward the partner and relationship.

As this chapter illustrates, the complexities of marital relationships are reflected in the many ways spouses make their marital union work. Gottman identified three types of stable couples: Validating, Volatile, and Conflict-avoiding. In many respects, these stable couple types are analogous to Fitzpatrick's couple types: Traditional, Independent, and Separate. We also reviewed research on gay and lesbian couples and long-term married couples. Overall, this review shows that there is more than one way to have a successful relationship, but each couple type is faced with unique challenges in achieving and maintaining relationship success.

7 Parent–Child Communication

The parent–child relationship is the most primary *intergenerational* relationship in the family. Children are born dependent upon their parents and require the aid of their parents longer than most other animal species. Unlike mate relationships, which are usually relationships of choice, children do not choose their parents. Parents make deep, lasting impressions upon their children. In turn, children dramatically alter the lives of people who become parents. For these and many other reasons, parent–child processes have been the subject of literally thousands of studies. Although we cannot comprehensively review all these studies in one chapter, we attempt to illuminate major themes related to communication processes in the parent–child relationship. What are the key issues in parent–child communication? After analyzing parent–child studies over the past 30–40 years, Grolnick and Gurland (2002) suggest that *warmth* and *control* are two dimensions of primary importance in parenting. Researchers often use different terminology for warmth (e.g., care, involvement, support, responsiveness) and control (e.g. discipline, limit-setting). However, most agree that balancing these two dimensions is a supremely important and challenging aspect to parenting (Baumrind, 1971; Grolnick & Gurland, 2002; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Schaefer, 1959). For many parents, this challenge appears to peak during toddlerhood and adolescence (Laursen & Collins, 2004; Noller, 1995).

This chapter is divided into three main sections. In the first part, we introduce the concepts of warmth and control to set the stage for a discussion of notable parenting styles and typologies. These parenting styles demonstrate various approaches toward negotiating warmth and control. In addition, we discuss how the use of parenting styles is affected by cultural background.

In the second part of the chapter, we examine parent–child relationships over time, looking at challenges in the exchange of warmth and control that are unique to each stage. We begin by studying parent interaction with infants and young children and move on to adolescents and young adult children (see chapter 9 for an extension of this discussion to grown adult children and parents). We examine how parental communication affects child outcomes such as self-concept, communication competencies, or self-control. In addition to a unidirectional perspective, which looks at how parental messages mold and affect children, we also explore a bi-directional perspective at each stage (Peterson & Hann, 1999; Stafford & Bayer, 1993). The bi-directional view is concerned with the reciprocal relationship between parents and children. For example, how do parents and children mutually influence and communicate with one another? The bi-directional approach is useful for studying reciprocal forms of interaction (e.g., infants and caretakers reciprocally responding to one another) and attachment bonds that develop between parents and children.

In the third part of the chapter, we explore social roles and challenges of being a mother, father, single parent, gay, or lesbian parent. The diversity of parent–child relationships is enormous, due to differences in age and sex (e.g., mother–infant, father–adolescent daughter), as well as other complex variables such as family structure, social roles, and culture. Finally, we look at how other family relationships, namely the relationship between parents, affect parent–child interaction.

PARENTING STYLES: BALANCING WARMTH AND CONTROL

What Are Warmth Messages?

Warmth messages are verbal and nonverbal behaviors that make the child feel cared for, supported, loved, and accepted. Peterson and Hann (1999) argue: “Perhaps the closest thing to a general law of parenting is that supportive, warm, sensitive, and responsive childrearing is associated with the development of social competence in the young” (p. 336). Consistent and genuine messages of warmth and involvement also contribute to a positive self-esteem in children (Stafford & Bayer, 1993) and adolescents (Noller, 1995). When most people think of warmth messages, explicit verbal statements come to mind (e.g., telling a child he/she is loved) (Cutrona, 1996). Indeed, children benefit from hearing parents’ explicit verbal expressions of warmth and involvement.

But verbal and nonverbal warmth messages often co-occur. Even when the verbal channel is available to them, parents still communicate a majority of their most meaningful warmth messages through nonverbal means alone. For example, a parent and child may simply engage in an activity together (e.g., playing a game, reading a book, watching a movie). Behavioral involvement is arguably as important or a more important form of support than explicit verbal messages alone. For instance, attending an adolescent child’s band recital may be as important, if not more so, than simply verbally congratulating the child on performing in the recital (i.e., verbal support), but not attending.

The fact that verbal and nonverbal messages co-occur means that when messages of verbal support are inconsistent with nonverbal behavior, it is obvious to most children (Baumrind, 1995). *Inconsistent warmth messages* involve the parent telling the child he/she is loved, but not acting as if the child is loved. Somewhat related, Seligman (1995) warns against *hollow warmth messages*. Such messages involve unconditional positive praise that is not contingent on anything the child does. Clearly children benefit from feeling unconditional love and security from their parents. The problem, according to Seligman (1995), is that some parents excessively shower their children with undeserving, unrealistic, Pollyannish praise (e.g., telling the child “You are the best kid” or “You are so good”) even when the child performs inappropriately or poorly. This leads to two negative outcomes for children. First, the child is prone to become passive, knowing that praise will come no matter how he or she acts. Second, “the child may have trouble appreciating that he has actually succeeded later on when he really does succeed and Mom praises him sincerely. . . He will have trouble learning that his actions work when they actually do” (Seligman, 1995, p. 287). Further, by overemphasizing how a child feels to the exclusion of what the child does, children are prone to become less persistent, more bored, more depressed, and less motivated to master skills. Overall, it is not surprising that self-esteem is more closely related to (1) genuine, specific support rather than ingenuine, nonspecific support, (2) actual support received rather than perceived support, and (3) actual success and mastery rather than simple feel good statements (Cutrona, 1996; Seligman, 1995).

Some parents simply do not communicate messages of warmth at all, or if they do, it occurs in such a disguised way that the message is ineffective. For example, parents may think that by teasing the child they are expressing warmth, when the child interprets the teasing as criticism or mockery. Likewise, whenever some parents offer a support message, they tag on a statement of criticism. As in marital relationships where one negative statement can wash out five or more positive statements, Gottman argues that the same may be true for parent–child relationships (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001).

What Are Control Messages?

Control is a second major dimension of parenting. It is important to distinguish between being a “controlling” parent, which usually has a negative connotation, versus a parent who is

“in control,” which is viewed favorably (Grolnick & Gurland, 2002). Controlling parents intrude on the child’s behaviors and decisions, so it is difficult for the child to act apart from the parents or in ways that deviate from the parents’ plan. These parents use a *controlling communication style* (i.e., they mostly issue directives, declaratives, negative acknowledgements and infrequently ask questions). In comparison, other parents only occasionally use controlling communication and primarily use a *conversing communication style* (i.e., using frequent questions and positive acknowledgements). Not surprisingly, abusive parents tend to use controlling messages and behaviors uniformly, rather than assessing what the situation calls for (Wilson & Whipple, 2001). Abusive parents then continue their controlling style even after the child has complied (i.e., continuing to scold the child after compliance) (Wilson & Whipple, 2001).

Is it better to be a controlling parent or a parent who is in control? Grolnick and Gurland (2002) argue, what is “good” parenting depends on what we desire for our children:

If the goal of socialization is simply to produce obedient, compliant children, the goal can easily be attained through the constant and controlling imposition and enforcement of rules. If, however, the goal of socialization is not just for children to comply, but to engage in behaviors volitionally and to accept and endorse the behaviors or develop a value for them, parents must facilitate children’s internalization of the regulation of their own behavior. (p. 20)

Furthermore, parental demands and control are more likely to be accepted by the child when accompanied by high levels of support/responsiveness (Baumrind, 1995). Yet warmth “does not imply unconditional acceptance; a warm and loving parent may also be a firm disciplinarian” (Baumrind, 1995, p. 58).

Methods of *firm control* stress self-discipline through firmness, reasonable demands for children, provision of guidance and limit setting, without being autocratic and overly punitive (Peterson & Hann, 1999, p. 333). Firm control involves monitoring and imposing restrictions, but not in an intrusive or overly directive way. Proponents of firm control do not advocate extreme forms of monitoring to the point of parental intrusion. They also do not advocate deficient monitoring or permissive parenting where the parents fail to set standards for the child and let him/her behave in any manner. Techniques of firm control are a component of parental induction that encourages children to think about “(1) why rules are necessary, (2) why their misbehavior is unacceptable, (3) how their behavior impacts others, and (4) how they might make their behavior more acceptable and make amends for any harm they have done” (Peterson & Hann, 1999, p. 334).

The hope is that children will come to internalize parental standards and expectations, so that eventually the child will be able to monitor his or her own behavior. In other words, the child will be able to determine when his or her behavior is inappropriate and what he or she should do about it. Unlike guilt induction, where the child is unpredictably and arbitrarily controlled to internalize blame, the type of parental induction encouraged by firm control frees the child from control. Learning to internalize reasonable standards and behavior ultimately enhances the child’s autonomy, because he/she can learn how to act within reason, and even how to respectfully disagree from parents’ viewpoints.

Firm control is also thought to be a proactive parenting style that attempts to curb misbehavior before it happens, as opposed to a reactive style where the parent responds to the problematic behavior. Parents can avoid some misbehavior before it happens by monitoring and staying involved in the child’s life and by equipping the child with skills to cope with problems on his or her own. For very young children, one proactive strategy is engaging the child’s attention in a positive activity instead of waiting for misbehavior to occur and then using discipline (Holden, 1983). For example, parents traveling with their small child on an airplane might bring activity books for the child or engage him or her in conversation, rather than

allowing the child to become bored and prone to misbehavior. The link between the proactive style and positive outcomes for adolescents is found in the reasoning that proactive parents use with children. Conversations that reveal the parents' reasoning, standards, and behavioral interpretations allow the child to have a good sense for what is right and wrong behavior.

Clearly parents have to set reasonable limits on behavior, as methods of firm control advocate. However, (Ginott 1965/1994) suggests that though parents can set limits on behavior, they should not set limits on feelings. Children deserve a choice in some matters that affect them. These matters may include domains such as food, clothes, homework, music lessons, and allowance (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997). In this choice making, children learn to develop their own interests and opinions. They develop themselves as individuals. They learn how to make decisions and the consequences of decisions—something that will be a lifelong process. Overall, Gottman et al. (1997) suggests, “[children] need to learn our values (like caring about how other people feel), and they learn these values largely from the way we treat them and how parents treat one another, not through lecture” (p. 23).

Baumrind's Parenting Typology

Researchers have labeled parenting styles to categorize the way parents balance warmth, control, and other important dimensions. Baumrind (1967, 1968, 1971) developed one of the most well-known taxonomies of parenting styles. Her taxonomy, based initially on extensive observations of parents and 3- and 4-year-old children, addresses how parents balance control and warmth when communicating with their children. Baumrind originally uncovered three distinct parenting styles: Authoritative, Permissive, and Authoritarian, detailed in Table 7.1.

In 1971, Baumrind suggested a fourth *neglecting style*, though it never received as much attention as the other three styles. The neglecting style refers to a disproportionately small group of parents who appear detached, neglecting, and indifferent, when compared to involved and nurturing parents.

Baumrind regards the authoritative (democratic) parenting style as the most effective means for molding competent and content children. Indeed, she found that children with authoritative parents are more self-reliant, have more self-control, and better moods. Children of permissive parents have low self-control and self-reliance, and have been characterized as immature. Baumrind described children of authoritarian parents as passively hostile, vulnerable to stress, lower in positive moods, and disaffiliative. Baumrind's findings have been mostly validated, especially with regard to the positive link between punitive discipline and social problems in children (e.g., Fletcher, Walls, Cook, Madison, & Bridges, 2008). Adolescents of authoritarian parents are less likely to have developed their own sense of identity, have lower self-esteem, and are so used to using their parents' standards or external moral standards to make decisions, that they may not have good judgment of their own. Not surprisingly, in a study of the frequency and content of college students' e-mail to parents (Trice, 2002), students from authoritative (democratic) families e-mailed their parents the most, but sought less specific academic and social advice from parents, compared to students from authoritarian families who sought the most advice. Students from permissive families e-mailed the least and also sought the least academic and social advice.

Cultural Background and Baumrind's Parenting Styles

More recent questions regarding Baumrind's parenting styles involve which parenting styles are most common and/or effective among families with different cultural backgrounds. To begin, what parenting styles are most *common*? Authoritarian parenting is more common in African American families and Mexican American families as compared to European American families (Driscoll, Russell, & Crockett, 2010; Jackson-Newsom, Buchanan, & McDonald, 2008).

Table 7.1 Parenting styles

| <i>Parental Style</i> | <i>Characteristics</i> |
|---|--|
| Authoritative style (sometimes termed democratic style) | Parents balance high nurturance with firm control and age-appropriate demands. They clearly communicate to the child what they require. These parents are especially good at using reason and facts to argue for compliance and to maintain firm control. At the same time, they are also willing to accept a child's opinion or refusal to comply, if the child presents a well-reasoned argument. Thus, there is give and take, or useful negotiation between parents and children. The parent has standards for the child, but is not coercive or restrictive in gaining compliance. Parents are involved and affectionate with their children, to an extent that is satisfying and useful for the child. Parents also use more positive reinforcement than punishment. |
| Permissive style | Parents offer moderate amounts of nurturance and are particularly noted for exercising little control. Parents enforce few rules, make few demands, and allow the child to regulate his/her own activities. These parents view themselves as resources to the child rather than enforcers of standards. These parents often give in to their child's complaining or pleading. When they do attempt to seek compliance from the child, it is often through coercive tactics of guilt or diversion of the child's attention rather than through well-reasoned conversations. |
| Authoritarian style | Compared to the other two styles, these parents are the most highly demanding, yet their high demands are not followed by reasoning. The parents are typically unresponsive to the child's needs, discourage verbal responses or reasoning from the child, and are unlikely to change their demands should their children appeal for such change. These parents favor punitive measures to control a child's will. They believe in and promote respect for authority, respect for order and tradition, and argue that the child should accept their word as it is. Their strict demands are sometimes grounded in strict theological standards. Again, compared to the other two styles, these parents express the lowest levels of affection, empathy, and support for their children. Hence, they have little positive emotional rapport with their children. Punishment is favored over positive reinforcement. |

Note. Adapted from Baumrind (1995) and Stafford & Bayer (1993)

Indeed, African American and Latina girls show more respect for parental authority than European American girls (Dixon, Graber, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008). Likely related to differences in respect for family authority, Mexican American boys, and to some extent girls, have been found to exhibit less mutual gaze and more submissive patterns of gaze and talk with their parents as compared to European American children (Schofield, Parke, Castañeda, & Coltrane, 2008). However, it is difficult to definitively say that one parenting style is more common among an ethnic group because of so many complicating factors. For example, in the case of Mexican American parents, some of the variance in parenting styles seems to be attributed to whether parents are first or successive generation immigrants, whether parents are U.S. born, and how acculturated they are. In general, Mexican American parents born in the U.S. tend to use less firm control, extending more adolescent autonomy and permissiveness than immigrant parents.

There is considerable debate about whether the authoritative (democratic) style is most *effective* for children of all backgrounds. Some suggest that the authoritative (democratic) style is really most applicable and effective for White, middle-class children living with both biological parents (Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, & Dornbusch, 1991). Socha, Sanchez-Hucles, Bromley, and Kelly (1995) explain that compared to White parents, Black parents stress more obedience and control, but in a way that is ecologically valuable. This means that parents are teaching their children skills that will help them adapt to their environment, which in the case

of the African American child often means an environment of racism. Socha et al. (1995) argue that respect for authority, rules, safe behavior, and achievement, stressed through obedience and high control, is especially adaptive for low-income and working-class African American children. An alternative explanation is that parenting techniques involving obedience and high control stem from pressure and stress experienced by parents in such environments (Florsheim et al., 2003; Socha et al., 1995).

Other research, however, has found that the core principles of authoritative (democratic) parenting are linked with positive child outcomes across diverse family contexts, including race, ethnicity, family structure, education, income, and gender (Amato & Fowler, 2002). Even when they compared groups as different as White, married, non-poor mothers, and Black, single, poor mothers, Amato and Fowler found that authoritative parenting was generally associated with the best child outcomes.

Gottman et al.’s Emotion Coaching Style

Growing respect for the authoritative (democratic) style paved the way for more detailed theories about how to balance firm control with parental responsiveness. Emotion regulation theory, stemming from Gottman et al. (1997), focuses on how parents and children connect emotionally and how handling these emotional moments with attentiveness and validation creates opportunities to teach problem solving and develop intimacy. In *Meta-Emotion: How Families Communicate Emotionally*, Gottman et al. (1997) explore how families feel about emotions and how these feelings affect the development of children. Gottman was heavily influenced by Haim Ginott (1965/1994), who authored *Between Parent and Child*. This was one of the first parenting books to suggest that parents would be more effective if they could learn how to better communicate with their children. Ginott’s perspective was revolutionary because it elevated communication to center stage in the study of parent–child relations (Prusank, 2007). Ginott argued that the best way parents can support children who are experiencing negative emotion is to listen to them. Listening does not mean that the parent must condone the child’s behavior. Indeed, Ginott argues that all feelings are acceptable, but all behavior is not (Gottman & DeClaire, 1997). It is the job of the parents to set limits and help the child problem solve about how he or she could behave appropriately. But the problem solving comes after the listening. As Gottman et al. summarize, parents should take the attitude that “statements of understanding precede statements of advice” (1997, p. 20). Unfortunately many parents rush in to give advice before they really understand the child’s emotions. Further, many parents make the mistake of dismissing or disapproving of their child’s emotions, or if they accept the emotion, they forget to set limits on behavior.

Gottman et al. (1997; Gottman & DeClaire, 1997) developed labels for parents based on how they respond to their child’s emotional moments, particularly their negative emotional moments. *Emotion-dismissing* parents feel that their child’s negative emotion is trivial and harmful. They try to distract the child from the emotion and ignore/minimize it, hoping it will go away. Further, they are not sure how to talk about emotions and fear that if they do it will make matters worse. Children of emotion-dismissing parents are theorized to distrust their emotions, feel that emotions are wrong, and have trouble regulating their emotion. It is unfortunate that children of emotion-dismissing parents do not learn to deal with negative emotional moments such as sadness or anger, because these skills prepare them to deal with negative emotions later in life.

Emotion-disapproving parents are much like the emotion-dismissing parents, but they express even more negative attitudes about the emotion. Consequently, they criticize and reprimand the child for expressing negative emotion, thinking their child’s negative emotions are manifestations of weakness, power struggles, and an inability to control themselves. Like children of emotion-dismissing parents, children of emotion-disapproving parents are theorized to have similar problems accepting and regulating their emotions. In a third style,

laissez-faire, parents accept and listen to their child's emotion, but they fail to follow up by helping the child set limits on behavior and problem solve about how to act and manage the future emotion.

As an alternative to the three previous styles, Gottman et al. (1997) advocate the *emotion-coaching* style. The steps of emotion coaching are listed in Table 7.2 along with examples of emotion-coaching vs. emotion-dismissing responses.

Emotion-coaching capitalizes on scaffolding. That is, parents offer cues and skills for recognizing and regulating emotions, but the hope is that the child will learn to deal with emotions and choose appropriate behavioral consequences on his/her own. Being able to deal with, regulate, and recover from negative emotion appears to boost children's relationship with peers as well as their ability to focus attention, do well in school, and stay physically healthy (Cupach & Olson, 2006). Even adolescent children benefit from emotion-coaching. Schrodt, Ledbetter, and Ohrt (2007) isolate parental confirmation as a specific communication tactic that boosts children's self-esteem, improves mental health by relieving stress, and functions as social support. Clearly, parental confirmation is a major component of emotion-coaching. Schrodt et al. further explain that families with a conversation orientation (see the chapter 3 discussion of Family Communication Patterns) allow children to be expressive without worrying so much about the disconfirmation that comes in families with high pressure to conform.

Table 7.2 Steps of emotion coaching

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1. **Notice low-intensity emotions.** The parent must be aware of the child's emotions (e.g., sadness or anger), ideally before they escalate to more high intensity emotional expressions.
Emotion-coaching response: The parent is aware enough to detect that the 6 year old, who is trying to color a picture, is becoming annoyed by the younger sibling who is trying to take away some of the crayons.
Emotion-dismissing response: The parent does not notice or care to acknowledge the low-intensity emotions.
 2. **See the negative emotion as an opportunity for teaching or intimacy.**
Emotion-coaching response: The parent is aware that now is a useful time to help understand and teach the child, before the child becomes too flooded with negative emotions. The parent also sees this moment as a chance to emotionally connect with the child.
Emotion-dismissing response: The parent sees the child's emotion as an unreasonable demand and the child should get out of the negative state as quickly as possible.
 3. **Listen to, empathize with, and validate the child's emotions.**
Emotion-coaching response: The parent might soothe the child, calm the child, and use affection, while empathizing and validating the emotion. The parent might say, "I wouldn't like it if someone took something from me either."
Emotion-dismissing response: The parent invalidates the emotion and tries to get the child to move on by saying, "Grow up" or "Go to your room" or "Don't be a baby."
 4. **Help the child verbally label the emotion he/she is having.**
Emotion-coaching response: The parent might say, "Does that frustrate you that you don't have the crayons that you wanted to use for your picture?"
Emotion-dismissing response: No response.
 5. **Set limits and help the child explore problem solving strategies.**
Emotion-coaching response: Although the parent accepts the child's emotions, he/she may help the child set limits ("It's okay to be angry, but not okay to hit your brother. Let's think of what we could do"). Thus, the parent helps the child determine appropriate behavior and brainstorm for strategies and goals for dealing with the problem. They may also help the child determine consequences for inappropriate behavior.
Emotion-dismissing response: No response.
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Note. From Gottman, J.M., Katz, L.F., & Hooven, C. (1997). *Meta-emotion: How families communicate emotionally*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. Adapted with permission.

PARENTS AND YOUNG CHILDREN

In the next part of the chapter, we examine how parenting styles are expressed in specific parenting practices that vary by age. Parents face challenges in the exchange of warmth and control that are unique to a child's age. We review how parental communication affects child outcomes such as self-conception, communication competencies, or self-control, beginning with young children and moving on to adolescents and young adults. We also explore the reciprocal relationship between parents and children, noting how children influence parents.

Warmth Messages and Young Children: Nonverbal

Although infants are limited in their capacity to express themselves, they are born with sensory abilities that prepare them to attend to caregivers (Van Egeren & Barratt, 2004). Mothers (or primary caregivers) are initially more responsive to infants' cues than infants are to maternal cues (Van Egeren, Barratt, & Roach, 2001). Researchers suggest that early mother–infant interactions are dominated by the infant (Gottman & Ringland, 1981; Van Egeren & Barratt, 2004). The infant makes a signal that elicits a response from the parent. The infant has a great capacity to control the parent, so long as the parent is attentive and motivated to respond. However, infants become contingently responsive to their mothers by at least 4 months of age (Van Egeren & Barratt, 2004).

Facial Expression and Gaze

As for facial expression, beginning at 4–9 weeks, face-to-face responsiveness and communication increase dramatically as infants learn to smile. *Reciprocal responsiveness* refers to whether caregivers respond appropriately and contingently to their children and whether children respond to their parents in such a manner (Baumrind, 1995). *Synchrony* in interaction refers to a person's ability to maintain a shared focus in the relationship (Peterson & Hann, 1999). Most parents react to the infant's newly learned ability to smile with increases in their own vocalizations, facial expressions, and gestures (i.e., reciprocal responsiveness) and a desire to focus with their infant in interaction (i.e., synchrony). While studying each other's faces, infants and caregivers engage in mutual gaze. Across all cultures, infants produce more frequent and more positive vocalizations when engaged in mutual gaze with a caregiver (Van Egeren & Barratt, 2004; Keller, Schoelmerich, & Eibesfeldt, 1988). Both infants and toddlers who experience more synchrony in the parent–child relationship become more competent communicators over time (Lindsey, Cremeens, Colwell, & Caldera, 2008).

Some caregivers fail to respond with reciprocity and synchrony to facial expressions and gaze. Adolescent mothers have been found to vocalize less and smile less to their infants (Barret & Roach, 1995). Likewise, depressed mothers show less nonverbal reciprocity and synchrony in their interactions with infants (Embry & Dawson, 2002). They are less likely to mimic their infants' positive emotional expressions and states (e.g., return a smile when the infant smiles). When non-depressed adults become unresponsive for some reason (e.g., their faces become blank or they close their eyes), infants react by becoming more animated, attempting to establish contact (Van Egeren & Barratt, 2004). The infant becomes distressed if bids to communicate subside or continually fail, which is often the case with depressed parents. When infants seek out closeness or a response but are chronically rejected, they then learn to purposely avoid their caregiver in times of stress (Stroufe, 2002).

Touch

Touch is another potent means of parent–child interaction. Hertenstein's (2002) research on parent–infant touch reveals that processes of conditioning and social learning characterize

these interactions. Infants learn that certain types of caregiver touch are related to emotional states and reactions. Infants also use touch to gather information and gain attention. At 5 months old, infants initiate and maintain touch with their mothers a quarter of the time they are interacting (Moszkowski & Stack, 2007).

Touch can communicate positively and negatively valenced emotions. On the positive side, touch is noted for both soothing infants and arousing their attention. Knowing that infants typically get upset when their caregivers stare at them with a prolonged expressionless face, Stack and Muir (1990) instructed one group of mothers to touch their 5-month infants while staring at them with an expressionless face and the other group not to touch their infants while staring with an expressionless face. The infants who were touched smiled more and grimaced less. The authors concluded that touch has the power to soothe infants, perhaps even when other nonverbal channels are unavailable.

In a more recent and naturalistic study of how infants are soothed, researchers observed interactions of infants, parents, and nurses during scheduled infant immunizations (Blount, Devine, Cheng, Simons, & Hayutin, 2008). Much of what distinguished a low-crying situation from a high-crying situation was nonverbal behavior, and especially touch. Prior to, during, or after the immunization, soothing nonverbal behaviors such as belly-to-belly contact, sucking (e.g., nursing, pacifier, bottle), playing with an object, and to some extent bouncing, rocking, patting, and stroking were associated with less crying. One verbal tactic also strongly linked to low crying was nonprocedural talk (e.g., when caregivers casually talked about topics other than the immunization). Some verbal behaviors that caregivers intended to be soothing (e.g., apologizing, empathizing, and reassuring) did not seem to prompt any reduction in crying.

Paralanguage

Researchers have also devoted considerable attention to paralanguage, or the way caregivers use their voices to communicate. *Motherese*, more recently termed *infant-directed speech* or *baby talk*, refers to the way caregivers modify their speech for infants and young children who are learning language (Barrett, 1995; Van Egeren & Barratt, 2004). Infant-directed speech is marked by high pitches, frequent and diverse changes in intonation, shorter utterances, longer pauses, vocal intensity, and simplified speech (Haslett & Samter, 1997). For example, when parents say to an infant, “What’s wrong?” or “You’re so special,” they do not usually use a monotone voice. Many drastically alter their vocal pitch and intensity when talking.

Infants are drawn to human voices more in general than to other sounds (Jusczyk, 1997), and they are particularly attracted to infant-directed speech (Van Egeren & Barratt, 2004). Even at just a few months, infants recognize the paralinguistic variations in pitch and phonetic structure (Jusczyk, 1997; Papousek, Bornstein, Nuzzo, Papousek, & Symmes, 1990). Because children recognize that it is aimed at them, infant-directed speech is a way for parents to signal they are involved with and care about the child. One could also think of infant-directed speech as a parent’s bid for attention from the child.

Warmth Messages and Young Children: Verbal

Early on, infant-directed speech plays a role in enhancing young children’s communication skills. Given that infants and young children are noted for short attention spans, the paralinguistic variety of infant-directed speech helps the child stay involved and attentive to learning (Stafford & Bayer, 1993). In addition, the simple sentence structure models for the child how to make his/her own first simple sentences. For example, the mother will say to the child, “Doggie barks,” and the child learns to repeat the sentence. Infant-directed speech may also help the child learn turn taking (i.e., when to talk and respond). For example, the mother will

ask a question and suggest to the child how and when to respond to the question (e.g., “How old is Katie? Say ‘two’”). This is an early form of scaffolding.

Scaffolding refers to intentionally structuring an event to enhance a child’s learning (Haslett & Samter, 1997). In scaffolding, a parent helps the child with a task part way and then welcomes the child to take over and finish the task. Parents constantly use scaffolding to teach behavioral skills as well as verbal communication skills. For example, some parents let their children help cook by giving them structured tasks they can handle in order to learn skills (e.g., measuring water in a measuring cup). Some parents also use scaffolding to teach other age appropriate social skills, such as helping the child to order food on his/her own at a restaurant in order to learn to communicate in a new context. The goal of scaffolding is to help the child for a period of time so that he/she eventually can complete tasks autonomously. Unfortunately, some parents confuse age appropriate scaffolding and involvement with parental intrusiveness (Barber & Harmon, 2002). One form of parental intrusiveness involves taking over for the child as soon as the child has trouble with a task. For example, as soon as the child has trouble reading, the parent takes over and reads the rest of the book.

Verbal sensitivity is another concept that has garnered attention in research. Verbal sensitivity encompasses scaffolding and more broadly refers to parents recognizing and responding to a child’s age appropriate needs. Verbally sensitive and positive interactions between mothers and their kindergarten children appear to predict better grades in high school and higher graduation rates, according to Gregory and Rimm-Kaufman’s (2008) longitudinal study. When mothers collaborated on problem-solving tasks with their kindergartner in ways that were “supportive, scaffolding, respectful, encouraging, responsive, appropriately interdependent, and on-task” the kids were more likely to graduate and have better high school grades (Gregory & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008, p. 508).

Not only do verbally sensitive messages help children perform better in school, but they can also work together with nonverbal messages to soothe children’s negative emotion. Bowlby (1973) argues that from ages 1–6, separation from a parent is a very real fear for a child. Consistent, explicit verbal expressions of warmth and assurance may allay some of these fears. For example, parents of children who are reluctant to go into the preschool classroom for the first time, might assure the child that they will be right outside the classroom to pick up the child after preschool. Children do not fully develop a sense of time until around age 8 (Piaget, 1977). Children benefit from being frequently reminded of their parents’ love, warmth, and involvement, both verbally and nonverbally. Recall Jencius and Rotter’s (1998) argument in chapter 3 that young children appear to be soothed when their bedtime ritual includes continuity statements from the parent (e.g., “I’ll see you in the morning” or “When you wake up, we have a lot of things to do tomorrow. We’re going to . . .”). As attachment theory (chapter 2) suggests, young children who feel secure and safe are more likely to explore their environment away from the parent, knowing that they can always return to their secure base if necessary. Although it may seem counter intuitive at first glance, consistent levels of positive involvement with very young children may actually encourage them to be more independent and willing to explore situations in which they will learn important lessons and social skills.

It is also important to remember that attachment bonds are bi-directional. When infants are born, they attach to their parents. However, parents’ baby-talk and messages of love do as much to enhance their own attachment to the child as the child’s attachment to them.

Control Messages and Young Children

Not long after children are born, parents realize needs for control in the parent–child relationship, in forms such as establishing routines, boundaries, and discipline. The study of parental control has been differentiated according to behavioral control and psychological control (Barber, 1996; Barber & Harmon, 2002; Gray & Steinberg, 1999; Miller-Day & Lee, 2001).

Behavioral control refers to the regulation of the child's behavior through behavioral monitoring and limit setting. *Psychological control* refers to the emotional and cognitive autonomy that parents allow children. Psychological control may include expressions of disappointment, parental intrusiveness, love withdrawal, guilt induction, coercion, or other techniques that appeal to pride, guilt, and shame (Miller-Day & Lee, 2001). Psychological control can be more potent, if not more so, than behavioral control. For this reason, researchers and practitioners are just as concerned about extreme forms of psychological control as they are about extreme forms of behavioral control. In reality, the two forms of control are often intertwined. In this section, we explore a few behavioral and psychological control strategies specific to parenting young children.

Behavioral Control Messages and Young Children

Most parents of young children admit there are times when they are simply concerned about compliance. They need to stop a child's destructive behavior immediately or they need to remove a child from a dangerous situation. To control these situations, many parents issue directives. For example, they yell "Stop" before the child crosses the street or touches the hot stove. Parents also use physical restraint. For instance, they pull the child back from crossing the busy street or they pick up their toddler so he/she cannot reach and continue to pull the baby sister's hair. Once parents are successful at securing immediate compliance, they may be able to reason with the child about the situation. This of course requires that the child is old enough to internalize regulations (usually at least 2) or not too emotionally flooded to reason. Clearly, there is a time and place for directives and some degree of physical control or restraint, and younger children respond to directive messages and physical restraint, so long as they are delivered in the context of positive affect (Krcmar, 1996). Typically, coercive nonverbal behavior from parents is most common in toddlerhood and dramatically declines toward adolescence (Laursen & Collins, 2004).

But the question remains to what extent should parents use tactics of physical coercion or punitive behaviors (e.g., spanking, slapping) at all? Many scholars, rightly concerned about child abuse, categorically reject the use of physical punishment. Baumrind (1995) asserts that harsh physical punishment has "no corrective purpose" and is "pathogenic," particularly when it is delivered in an arbitrary, inconsistent, unstructured manner in a "disorderly home" (p. 67). Indeed, inconsistent discipline is characteristic of parents who are physically or psychologically abusive. Scholars can agree that extreme forms of physical punishment are entirely inappropriate and destructive for children (see chapter 16 for discussion of physical abuse).

Other behaviors, particularly spanking, are the subject of heated debate. Gottman et al. (1997) argue that spanking often occurs at times when parents could, and perhaps should, have used other alternatives to control behavior. One of the major concerns with spanking is that it may spur children to become aggressive themselves when they are faced with conflict, and it may damage a child's self-esteem. Indeed, high levels of spanking and low levels of reasoning appear to prompt children to use more aggression toward their parents and peers (Gottman et al., 1997; Larzelere, Klein, Schumm, & Alibrando, 1989). In spite of the potentially negative consequences, 94% of parents with children under age five say they have used or continue to use spanking (Hicks-Pass, 2009).

Both Baumrind (1995) and Gottman et al. (1997) contend that children who have received very infrequent spankings in the context of a generally positive parent-child relationship appear not to suffer harmful effects. Baumrind (1995) writes: "Corporal punishment administered in private for willful defiance rather than for childish irresponsibility, not in anger, and not to children younger than eighteen months or to teenagers, may well be effective and harmless in that it does not generate hostility, persistent dysphoria, or maladjustment" (p. 68). One problem, however, is defining "infrequent spankings" and the "generally positive context"

in which the spankings occur. This varies dramatically by family (Hicks-Pass, 2009). Further, once parents use spanking, it is an easy tactic to resort to again. Needless to say, the appropriateness of physical punishment remains a controversial topic among scholars and parents alike.

Psychological Control Messages and Young Children

Parents of young children offer rewards and punishments, in both psychological and tangible forms, to secure compliant behavior. An example of a tangible reward could be: “I’ll buy you an ice cream cone if you are not fussy while we shop at the store.” Praise and acknowledgment are common psychological rewards. For instance, to secure compliance, a parent might say, “Wow, you got your pajamas on all by yourself; what a big girl” (Baumrind, 1995, p. 70). Controlling children through reward systems, or likewise controlling them through coercive punishment, secures compliance for the moment, but may not lead to internalization of values. This occurs because the child has little or no reason to alter his or her behavior other than to avoid the punishment or receive the reward (Wilson & Whipple, 2001). Once the reward or punishment is removed, the child is tempted to resort to previous behavior. However, sometimes parents are only concerned about securing momentary compliance, and in this case rewards and punishments are effective.

Threatening to withdraw attention or love is a form of psychological punishment for young children. Though withdrawing attention is a method that has garnered some support, the tactic of withdrawing love, or threatening to do so, has been highly criticized. The manipulation involved in most extreme forms of love withdrawal (e.g., threatening to leave the child, locking the child in a room, or telling the child you won’t love him/her until he/she meets expectations) promotes low self-esteem, feelings of blame and guilt, and possibly other long-term consequences that have not been fully researched (Grolnick & Gurland, 2002; Stafford & Bayer, 1993). The withdrawal of love is intended to punish the child by capitalizing on feelings of dependency and fear and inducing guilt. The child is caught in a relationship that binds him or her to the parents in dependency, and the parent then manipulates the fact that the child is dependent in a way that the parent can get what he or she wants. Usually what the parent wants is to discourage the child’s autonomy or discourage deviation from parental expectations (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). The fact that children want their parents to be supportive and involved in their lives may be the very reason that love withdrawal is such a potent, but unethical, technique for gaining compliance.

A more popular and well-supported discipline technique termed a *time out* withdraws attention or inclusion as a consequence for bad behavior. It is also designed to help children calm emotions. Time outs are really a combination of behavior and psychological control. In a time out, the parent removes the child from the problematic situation and isolates him or her for a short period of time in another room or another space, perhaps by making the child sit in a chair.

In situations where children are highly emotional, the first priority of a time out is to give children time to calm their emotional flooding. Flooding refers to overwhelming feelings of anger, fear, or sadness, so powerful that the flooded person cannot reasonably deal with much else at the moment (Ekman, 1984; Gottman, 1994). As Gottman et al. (1997) remark, no one, not a parent or child, can reason when emotionally flooded. One mistake some parents make is to respond to their child’s flood of negative affect with their own flood of emotions. Clearly it is easier to say than do, but parents often need to take their own “time outs” before responding. Carson and Parke (1996) found that fathers who are more likely to respond to their children’s negative affect with negative emotional displays of their own have preschool children who are less socially skilled (i.e., less willing to share, more verbally aggressive, more avoidant of others, and more likely to become physically aggressive) than their preschool classmates. Carson and Parke concluded that these children were not learning adequate emotional regulation skills from their fathers.

The second important part of time outs is the specific reasoning or emotion coaching that parents interject sometimes before and usually after the time out. Indeed, successful time outs depend on a child's reasoning ability. Children need to recognize the problematic behavior, reason why it is wrong, and internalize the expected behavior. Parents also need to assure the child of their love as they engage in this reasoning. If administered poorly, time outs can be a form of love withdrawal (Stafford & Bayer, 1993), especially if the timeouts last more than a few minutes, are not coupled with reasoning grounded in assurances of love, and are administered to children too young to reason. Obviously, a time out administered to a 1 year old for a long period of time is inappropriate and will likely not accomplish any level of reasoning. In an adapted form of the time out, some parents require a time out for the toy the children are fighting over, rather than a time out for the children. This technique is intended to communicate that the parent does not globally want to withdraw love from the child but does not like the way he or she is playing with the toy. Thus, it is not the child who is bad, but the action that is bad (Seligman, 1995, p. 289).

PARENTS AND ADOLESCENTS/YOUNG ADULTS

Warmth Messages and Adolescent/Young Adults: Nonverbal and Verbal

Like young children, adolescents and young adults thrive on warmth messages, though the messages may take different forms. In this section, we look at nonverbal and verbal warmth messages among parents and adolescents/young adults and then turn to verbal messages.

We introduced the concepts of reciprocal responsiveness and synchrony earlier in this chapter in the section on parents and infants. Reciprocity and synchrony help parents and children develop emotional bonds to one another beyond infancy. Trees (2000) examined the impact of responsiveness and synchrony in the parent–young adult relationship. She studied the extent to which young adults felt their mothers' actual nonverbal behaviors were supportive and whether movement synchrony (e.g., beginning and ending movements at the same time) affected perceptions of support. Trees videotaped the interaction of mothers and their young adult children while they discussed a "relational problem," which for most young adults involved a problem with a friend, romantic partner, co-worker, or roommate. After the interaction, Trees asked the young adults to complete a survey indicating how supportive they felt their mother was. In addition, using a video recall procedure, the young adults were asked to watch selected segments of the video and report how appropriate they felt their mother's nonverbal behavior was at that moment. Trees' goal was to establish initial links between (1) nonverbal sensitivity/appropriateness and support and (2) synchrony and support.

In general, the young adults in Trees' (2000) study felt that their mothers' responses were more supportive when the mothers displayed vocal warmth/interest, kinesic/proxemic attentiveness, and more movement synchrony with them. More recently, Dailey (2008) explored how parents' and adolescents' nonverbal behaviors work to indicate confirmation or disconfirmation to the other. Her results revealed that vocalics displaying involvement and pleasantness were most positively linked to confirmation. However, nonverbal behaviors only partially accounted for perceptions of confirmation, meaning that feeling confirmed stems from other sources, likely verbal behavior as well (Dailey, 2008).

Warmth Messages and Adolescent/Young Adults: Negotiating Changing Attachments

Feeling parental confirmation, support, and positivity seems to pay big dividends for adolescents, particularly as the attachment relationship between parents and children undergoes large

changes. Sufficient levels of support along with gradual opportunities for autonomy encourage processes of individuation and encourage adolescents to experiment with social skills specific to relationships outside the family (Noller, 1995; Perosa & Perosa, 1993).

In addition, parent–child conflict during adolescence is not only normative, but it prompts the dyad to revise attachment expectations and renegotiate roles (Hock, Eberly, Bartle-Haring, Ellwanger, & Widaman, 2001; Laursen & Collins, 2004). Laursen and Collins (2004) even go so far as to suggest that some conflict during adolescence actually strengthens the parent–child attachment for the short and especially long term, by stimulating communication about the relationship. However, this only appears to be the case for parents and adolescents who already have good relationships. The fact that they already have good relationships probably means that they are effective communicators, which would bode well when they have to deal with increased conflict in adolescence. Adams and Laursen (2007) found that for adolescents who had generally positive parent–child relationships, when conflicts increased from low to medium levels, the conflicts were “never associated with worse outcomes and were sometimes associated with better outcomes” (Adams & Laursen, 2007, p. 455). For adolescents who had a parent–child relationship characterized by negativity, “increases in conflict to medium levels were never associated with better outcomes and were sometimes associated with worse outcomes” (Adams & Laursen, 2007, p. 455). Adams and Laursen add that *high* levels of negativity and *high* levels of conflict are rarely constructive.

A lot of parent and adolescent conflicts are about expectations and values. Some parents joke that they feel their teenagers are from another planet or culture. In some immigrant families, adolescents really are growing up in a culture different than that of their parents. Handling these cultural differences creates another domain of conflict. First- and second-generation Latino young adults have more conflicts with parents over acculturation issues than third-generation Latinos and European and African Americans (Dennis, Basañez, & Farahmand, 2010). According to Dennis et al., first- and second-generation Latino parents felt their young adult children were acting too American. Dennis et al. speculated that as children launch to young adulthood, first- and second-generation Latino parents may worry more acutely about how their children will tend to family obligations and whether they will adhere to gender expectations.

Much has been written about adolescents’ experiences separating from their parents, but little attention has been given to how parents respond to separation from their adolescents (Hock et al., 2001). Hock et al. (2001) indicate that it is normal for parents to express feelings of missing a child who has grown more independent or left home. Parents, and especially mothers, indicate feeling more warmth and affection toward their adolescents than adolescents report feeling toward their mothers. Some argue that mothers’ optimistic feelings of attachment may be an attempt to counter their adolescents’ impending detachment (Laursen & Collins, 2004; Noller & Callan, 1990). Parents who express overly high anxiety about adolescent distancing may be “unaware of or deny that distancing is normal and appropriate for their children; alternatively, these parents may ‘personalize’ their adolescents’ movement to extrafamilial relationships: That is, they may view such movement as rejection. The tension associated with ‘losing the child to others’ could reflect jealousy and possessiveness” (Hock et al., 2001, p. 294). For sure, the parent–child relationship evolves during adolescence, and some of this disengagement is normative.

Control Messages and Adolescents/Young Adults

Parents appear to primarily utilize psychological mechanisms for control with adolescents and young adults as opposed to behavioral tactics (e.g., spanking, physical restraint). In this section, we explore disappointment, guilt induction, and parental monitoring and intrusiveness.

Disappointment and Guilt Induction

Disappointment is a powerful means of psychological control because it capitalizes on children who seek to please their parents. Naturally, children attempt to meet parental expectations to receive positive reinforcement and to avoid negative punishments such as guilt. Miller-Day and Lee (2001) explain, the variety of options that parents have for communicating disappointment are as follows (p. 8). Parents may express *situational disappointment* (e.g., “My mom was disappointed that I didn’t try out for the volleyball team”) or *enduring disappointment* (e.g., “I’m a failure to my mom”). Further, parents can express disappointment through *direct verbal strategies* (“s/he tells me directly” or “s/he criticizes me,” *indirect verbal strategies* (“s/he makes little comments”), *nonverbal strategies* (“s/he sends the message with body language”), or *avoidance* (“s/he doesn’t communicate disappointment. I usually hear it from someone else”). According to Miller-Day and Lee, most young adults say that their parents express disappointment directly more than indirectly. However, compared to fathers, mothers are perceived to make more indirect verbal criticisms that are perceived to be critical “digs” at the child. Mothers also appear to rely on nonverbal expressions more than verbal expressions. Daughters perceive their mothers to be more critical when disappointed, and sons perceive their fathers to be more critical when disappointed. Young adults who feel their parents are less critical in their expressions of disappointment perceive that they have more personal control.

Almost all parents express disappointment to their children at one point or another. Some expressions of disappointment may be useful or motivating for children and others destructive, depending on how they are administered. When parental disappointment is laced with direct or indirect criticism or mockery, it is especially destructive for children (Gottman et al., 1997; Miller-Day & Lee, 2001). In addition, children internalize global disappointment as contempt and a “trait of failure” (Gottman et al., 1997). As Seligman (1995) suggests: “Any time you find your child to be at fault, it is important to focus on specific and temporary personal causes, if truth allows, and avoid blaming the child’s character or ability” (p. 63). Specific, constructive complaints that prompt an optimistic character in a child sound like the following, “Tammy, you are really misbehaving today. I don’t like it at all” (Seligman, 1995, p. 64). On the other hand, an example of a global, destructive criticism that leads to a pessimistic character is: “Tammy, what’s wrong with you? You are always such monster” (Seligman, 1995, p. 64).

Somewhat similar to disappointment, *guilt induction* is another psychological means of control. Guilt induction prompts the child to internalize family and parental problems, even when the problems may realistically be rooted in the parent or some external force. Nonetheless, the child feels he or she caused the problem and deserves blame. Abusive parents are noted for skewing attributions of blame so that blame is placed on the child (Wilson & Whipple, 2001). For the child, undeserved and extreme internalization of guilt often leads to depression, suicide, or other related symptoms (Barber, 1992; Peterson & Hann, 1999).

Parental Monitoring and Intrusiveness

Children desire their parents to be involved in their lives, and even high school students benefit from parents’ high involvement and a robust degree of parental monitoring (Grolnick & Gurland, 2002). But the balance of involvement is tricky for parents. High involvement and monitoring is best in the form of support rather than controlling behavior. Controlling parents intrude in the child’s behaviors and decisions making it difficult for the child to act apart from what the parent has in mind.

Pomerantz and Ruble (1998) found that when parents were involved in a child’s school work in a “controlling” way, children felt (1) an external not internal force caused them to do well, (2) performance and results were more important than actually learning (e.g., as

taught when a parent picks the child's topic for the report), and (3) they were incompetent (e.g., as taught when a parent helps the child before the child asks for it) (Grolnick & Gurland, 2002, p. 19).

On the other hand, involvement in an "autonomy-granting" manner (1) made the children feel he or she was the cause of good behavior, (2) indicated that learning was most important (e.g., the child was encouraged to pick his/her own topic), and (3) communicated confidence with the child (e.g., standing by the child while encouraging him/her to figure out the problem by himself or herself) (Grolnick & Gurland, 2002, p. 19). In sum, parents' attempts to dominate and control their adolescents have deleterious effects on the adolescents' mental health and prevent them learning to monitor and regulate their own behavior.

Parental intrusiveness is marked by anxious parental overinvolvement and overprotectiveness. Intrusive parents control most aspects and decisions in the child's life. Parents truly become controlling. Through intrusiveness, the parent manipulates the child's emotional experiences and impairs the individuation process (Barber & Harmon, 2002; Peterson & Hann, 1999). So controlled by the parent, the child is not allowed to develop his or her own interests and opinions apart from the parent. In interviews with active and remitted bulimic women regarding factors that maintained their disorder, women indicated that their parents were intrusive, though not globally intrusive (Rorty, Yager, & Rossotto, 1993; see also chapter 14). They described their parents as intrusive in areas where they desired more personal privacy (e.g., personal appearance, weight, shape, personal space, and private thoughts and feelings). Alternatively, they felt their parents were underinvolved in areas where they wished for greater care and attention (e.g., emotional support).

Parental intrusiveness in the parent-adolescent or parent-young adult relationship is particularly knotty, especially for children who are learning to cope in an individualistic culture such as the United States. At the very age that adolescents and young adults are supposed to be becoming more self-sufficient, parental intrusiveness breeds dependency. Children will not develop age-appropriate social skills to deal with social situations and problems of their own because they are used to their parents taking care of everything for them. Imagine parental intrusiveness in the form of the parent who immediately calls the coach when the teenager does not get a starting position on the baseball team, or the parent who calls the boyfriend as soon as the teenager begins having trouble with the boy.

In the best case scenario, adolescents who have been subject to controlling parenting develop a strong sense of self-control and discipline, but they are so used to doing what their parents tell them to do that they do not develop skills to cope apart from their parents (Roberts & Steinberg, 1999). Manzeske and Stright (2009) discovered that young adults who experience high levels of psychological control from their mothers are poorer at regulating their own emotions, even when well-intentioned mothers deliver high affection with high control. Poor emotion regulation means that these adolescents were more likely to become overwhelmed and flooded by their negative emotion. In addition, the emotion affected their behavior in negative ways that they regretted later.

One particular form of intrusive parenting that has recently captured the attention of the lay public and the media is what is colloquially referred to as "helicopter parenting." Helicopter parenting is a term used to describe overly involved parents who hover over their children, ready to swoop down and resolve any problems that the child might encounter (Cline & Fay, 1990). It is most commonly observed in parents of young adults. Communication scholars conceptualize helicopter parenting as a form of overparenting (Segrin, Woszidlo, Givertz, Bauer, & Taylor, 2011). Segrin et al. explain this as a developmentally inappropriate parenting practice driven by the overzealous desires of parents to ensure the success and happiness of their children, typically in a way that is construed largely in the parents' terms, and to remove any perceived obstacles to those positive outcomes. Overparenting often occurs in the context of an enmeshed family system. Overparenting young adult children is associated with a higher sense of entitlement, as these children apparently feel that they deserve the intensive problem

solving, provision of support, and tangible assistance provided to them by their well-meaning but perhaps misguided parents (Givertz & Segrin, 2010; Segrin et al., 2010). Children of “helicopter” parents also show significantly more evidence of dependent and neurotic personality traits (Montgomery, 2010). This illustrates the paradox of overly controlling parenting: It is often enacted with the intention of producing positive child outcomes, but may do more harm than good.

Parents of adolescents and young adults also struggle with how to monitor the whereabouts and activities of their child in a way that is useful. In chapter 15, we discuss how parental monitoring can be a powerful deterrent to adolescent alcohol misuse. When adolescents live with parents who are concerned about where they are going and who they are with, it can let them know that someone notices and cares about them. New technologies such as cell phones and social networking sites provide parents with additional channels to monitor their children, but these new technologies are not quick fixes to age old parenting challenges.

With regard to cell phones, Weisskrich (2008) cautions that adolescents and parents may have incongruent views about the purpose of the cell phone. For example, is the phone a tool for the parent to call and check up on the child? Is the phone a tool for the adolescent to use when he/she needs to call the parent for help, support, information or advice? Or, more simply, is the phone just for the adolescent’s own social networking? The parents may think that if their adolescent has a cell phone, and if they use it call the adolescent often, they will have more and better information about the child. Weisskrich (2008) found that providing an adolescent with a cell phone does not necessarily mean that parents will be able to monitor their adolescent better. The more parents call their adolescent on the cell phone, the less truthful information they actually receive. In comparison, adolescents who initiate calls to inform parents of what they are doing, ask advice, or seek permission seem to offer more truthful information and have better family relationships.

Overall, adolescents and young adults appear to fare best when their parents are supportive and involved, provide structure and standards, yet still grant them autonomy. These adolescents/young adults tend to have better mental health, more self-confidence, and more self-competence because they have internalized appropriate standards and coping behaviors themselves (Roberts & Steinberg, 1999).

THE INFLUENCE OF FAMILY ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS ON PARENT-CHILD INTERACTION

In the final section of this chapter, we explore social roles for being a father, mother, single parent, lesbian or gay parent and unique communication challenges and strengths of these roles. We also look at systems factors that influence parent–child communication, such as the effect of the parental relationship on the parent–child interaction.

Parent-Child Interaction and Social Roles

Fathering

Fewer men are experiencing fatherhood now than in the 1960s (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001). This is partly because more men are opting not to have children, and partly because some men are biological fathers, but not involved in “fathering” (i.e., are not involved in their children’s lives) (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001). Compared to recent decades, fathers have clearly increased the amount of time they spend with their children (Silverstein, 2002). However, fathers on the whole still spend significantly less time with their children than mothers do (Stafford & Dainton, 1995; Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). Among married fathers, fathers in dual-shift, working-class families spend the most time with their children (Silverstein, 2002). Out of necessity,

they must assume child care responsibilities when mother is at work. Fathers in upper middle-class families that pay for someone other than the mother to care for the child spend the least amount of time with their children. Doherty and Beaton (2004) explain that wives' expectations for how involved their husbands should be as fathers appear to influence their husbands' involvement more so than husbands' own expectations influence their involvement.

When compared to other men, men who are fathers have similar psychological and physical well-being. However, fathers are more involved in civic and social organizations (e.g., church, school organizations, service clubs) and more involved in intergenerational family connections. In addition, fathers with children at home actually average more work hours per week and are less likely to be unemployed than men without children or fathers with grown children (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001). There are still strong expectations for fathers to live up to the “provider” role.

Academic journals have continued to publish articles about fathering at a steady and, in many cases, an increased rate over the last 80 years (Goldberg, Tan, & Thorsen, 2009). This may be in part because the social role of being a father has evolved considerably, and researchers seek to understand the trends. Morman and Floyd (2002) argue that over the last four centuries, and even within the last century, role expectations for fathers have cycled back and forth between being “a detached, authoritarian father and one of being a companionate nurturant father” (p. 398). Many cultural stereotypes peg mothers as primary caregivers who specialize in the emotional/relational aspects of parenting, and fathers as disciplinarians whose primary contribution is income from outside work to support the family, along with other lesser roles as problem solver and playmate for children.

There is some empirical evidence for these stereotypical styles. For example, in a recent study on the parenting styles of fathers and mothers of adolescent children, McKinney and Renk (2008) found that in general, fathers tend to parent with a more authoritarian style, while mothers tend to parent with a more authoritative style (p. 825). On the whole, fathers are less involved in the lives of their children than mothers. It does not appear that fathers are biologically unable to perform these traditional tasks of nurturing, caretaking, and high involvement with children. As compared to married fathers, single fathers rank higher on measures such as child involvement, parenting skills, warmth messages to children, and housework (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). For reasons researchers are still exploring, most likely gendered social roles, married fathers just are not performing these child-centered tasks as much as mothers.

Even though there is considerable support for these stereotypical fathering styles, there is also a growing body of research to indicate that approaches to fathering are changing and that there is variance in the way men approach fathering. For instance, the current generation of fathers report that their relationships with their sons have higher levels of closeness, relationship satisfaction, and affectionate verbal and nonverbal communication than did their relationships with their own fathers (Morman & Floyd, 2002). Children appear to be receptive to fathers who offer emotional support. For example, daughters and fathers report that they are more satisfied with their interpersonal communication when they interact with a conversation orientation versus a conformity orientation (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008). Recall from the discussion of Family Communication Patterns in chapter 3 that a conversation orientation is marked by open communication, parental support, reciprocity, and mutual understanding.

Some scholars suggest that mothers and fathers may not be so different in their child-care competencies (Gauvain, Fagot, Leve, & Kavanagh, 2002). In interviews, Golden (2007) discovered that fathers, like mothers, spoke to the need and challenge of balancing multifaceted tasks in parenting—fathers spoke to blending instrumental *and* emotional tasks in the care of their children. That is, they did not frame their contributions according to cultural stereotypes of fathers who are detached from the emotional side of parenting and singularly focused on the instrumental side. Golden's sample size was limited (i.e., 12 fathers in intact families), but the

in-depth nature of the interviews revealed that some fathers very much value their emotional connections with their children. The fathers in Golden's study described their emotional connections surfacing in expressions of emotion, feelings of closeness, spending time together, and "doing stuff" together (Golden, 2007, pp. 277–278).

Mothering

Until the 1970s, most empirical research on parent–child communication was actually research on *mother–child* communication (Grolnick & Gurland, 2002). Parenting was a task reserved primarily for mothers, because divided sex roles, especially typical of the mid 1900s, encouraged fathers to place their primary focus on resource allocation in the workforce (Mintz, 1998). Mothers were thought to have a direct and exclusive influence on their children, for better or for worse. Mothers were lauded for providing children with secure bonds and proper socialization, and they were also blamed for problems the child developed. This view led to a trend termed "mother-blaming,"—a term insinuating that people have overestimated the effect of mothers' behavior on children, when not all child problems stem exclusively from the influence of mothers (Grolnick & Gurland, 2002, p. 7). Influences from peers, fathers, the family system, external events, genetics, and numerous other sources affect children.

Attention to the role of mothers in families, as compared to fathers, has and still does overwhelm the research literature. While fathers have been stereotyped as detached and authoritarian, mothers have been stereotyped as nurturing caretakers mostly focused on the emotional/relational aspects of parenting. As in the case of fathers, some of the stereotypes of mothers have been exaggerated. But, there is support for the notion that mothers have stronger emotional connections with their children, are more emotionally affected themselves by interactions with their children, and take a more active role in parenting than fathers. For example, adolescents in general indicate that they are closer to their mothers and share feelings more openly with them (Noller & Callan, 1991). Mothers also become more distressed after conflict with their adolescents, perhaps in part because some mothers see their role as family peacemaker and conciliator (Laursen & Collins, 2004). Even in dual-career families where both mother and father say they place similar value on spending time with their children, mothers appear to take a more active role in day-to-day parenting (Snyder, 2008). In families where the father is stereotypically authoritarian, adolescents who at least have a mother who parents in an authoritative (democratic) way seem to be buffered to some extent from the negative consequences of authoritarian parenting (McKinney & Renk, 2008, p. 825).

Women appear to feel considerable pressure to be a "good mother" as evidenced from the amount of advice they receive about motherhood and the powerful effect that it has on them (Heisler & Ellis, 2008). In a study of face-negotiation theory and motherhood, Heisler and Ellis discovered that while women do not necessarily admit that they work to put up a "good mother face" to outsiders, they do express why they want to show they are a "good mother" and how they go about displaying this image. The mothers in their study reported putting on a "good mother" face to "gain acceptance from others, for personal reasons, or helping others" (Heisler & Ellis, 2008, p. 463). In addition, they felt they demonstrated their mothering skills by the way they interacted with their children, showed accomplishments of their children, and showed how much they sacrificed their own personal needs.

Today, more women than ever are balancing maternal employment with being a good mother. Indeed, 2010 marks the year that women "cross the 50% threshold and become the majority of the American workforce" (Micklethwait, 2010, p. 7). More and more children are parented by dual-career parents. This means that mothers are offering instrumental support (e.g., financial resources) to the family countering the stereotype that women are singularly focused on the relational tasks of parenting. Many women feel pressured as they attempt to be a "good mother" and to also have a good career. Some women reduce guilt about not

spending as much time as they want or feel they should by taking on an attitude that it is the quality of time they spend with their children that matters more than the quantity of time (Snyder, 2007). Interestingly, mothers in intact families report that they are spending more time with their children now than they did two decades ago (see chapter 3). Grolnick and Gurland (2002) argue that while “work status may or may not affect parenting, work stress clearly does” (p. 26). Work stress spills over to parent–child interactions, resulting in parents who are more emotionally and behaviorally withdrawn from their children and less caring and loving in their behavior.

Single Parents

Single parents face numerous challenges, such as stress, loneliness, minimal social support, and a lack of economic resources (DeFrain & Olson, 1999; Grolnick & Gurland, 2002). After analyzing numerous studies comparing two-parent and one-parent families, Biblarz and Stacey (2010) conclude: “A vast body of research indicates that, other things being equal (which they rarely are), two compatible parents provide advantages for children over single parents. This appears to be true irrespective of parental gender, marital status, sexual identity, or biogenetic status” (p. 17). There are several complexities to consider in this statement, beginning with the assumption of two *compatible* parents. Having two parents is helpful as long as both parents get along—a topic we discuss more at the end of this chapter. Further, the benefits of two parents are realized only when they are both involved in the child’s life in positive ways. Even though having one parent who uses an authoritative (democratic) parenting style is better than none, children fare best when they have two parents who each use an authoritative (democratic) style (McKinney & Renk, 2008). In addition, looking at marital status does not always tell the full story. In their review of African American single mother families, Jones, Zalot, Foster, Sterrett, & Chester (2007) argue that not all single parents are alike. Many African American single parents, and single parents of any ethnicity, rely on other committed people in their social network who act as another parent. For example, a grandmother may co-parent with the mother. And in a later part of the chapter we discuss how children with two committed same-sex parents fare better than those with one parent, even if the relationship of their same-sex parents does not have legal status. But things are never simple in social science. The addition of a stepparent appears to be one situation where there is clear evidence that adding another parent is not necessarily more beneficial to children. We discuss this exception more in chapter 13.

As we begin to look at the challenges of single parents, it is apparent that most single parents are tightly bound to their jobs in order to support the family. Consequently, children in single mother families do not spend as much time with their mothers, compared to children in intact families. The single parent’s lack of time also contributes to less parental authority and supervision in single parent families (Knok, 1988). Some single parents are too pressured to fully engage in parenting. Many stressed and exhausted single parents have no partner to offer social support, and little time to develop social support networks. When their stress “spills over” into their parenting, it can result in permissive or punitive parenting tactics or lack of follow-through on punishment (Grolnick & Gurland, 2002; Simons & Johnson, 1996).

When comparing single fathers and single mothers, single fathers appear to be better off financially compared to single mothers, and single fathers receive more social support (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). Some single mothers never had a spouse to help support them and the child, and those who are divorced suffer greatly when the former spouse does not pay child support. However, even though single fathers are more involved in their children’s lives than married fathers, single mothers still score higher than single fathers on measures of displays of affection, involvement, time spent talking, and monitoring children’s school work and peer relationships (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010).

Adolescent single mothers benefit greatly from supportive parents and families of origin. In fact, Florsheim et al.'s (2003) study of adolescent African American and adolescent Latino parents found that the quality of the mother's relationship with her own parents predicted her adjustment to parenthood. Florsheim et al. (2003) also found that adolescent African American parents were less likely to stay romantically involved after the birth of a child than were adolescent Latino parents. However, adolescent African American fathers were no more likely than adolescent Latino fathers to disengage from parenting. Overall, many single parents face difficult parenting challenges that stem from economic disadvantage, lack of support, and heightened stress, although intact families are not immune to such challenges.

Gay and Lesbian Parents

Several prominent studies and reviews of research present an equal outcomes argument. That is, children with two lesbian or gay parents do as well as those with two heterosexual parents on measures of psychosocial adjustment (e.g., cognitive abilities, behavior, emotional development, self-esteem, depression, and anxiety (Meezan & Rausch, 2005; Tasker, 2005). In addition, there is no evidence that children raised in same-sex environments are more likely to be homosexual or to experience gender identity confusion (Meezan & Rausch, 2005; Tasker, 2005). Reviews such as these, which focus on child outcomes, carry weight because the gold standard for good parenting is probably the actual condition of the children.

Setting aside measures of child outcomes, how are the parenting skills and parenting investments of gay or lesbian parents? The general message from reviews of research is that good parenting is not inherently linked to gender (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Meezan & Rauch, 2005). But how does this explain the fact some select studies reveal small differences in parenting skills and investments that favor lesbian parents (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Meezan & Rauch, 2005)? For example, Biblarz and Stacey (2010) insist that "based strictly on the published science, one could argue that two women parent better on average than a woman and a man, or at least than a woman and man with a traditional division of family labor" (2010, p. 17). To be clear, the argument is not that women are inherently better parents, but rather because of their socialization some women invest more in children and rank higher in parenting skills as compared to men. According to Biblarz and Stacey, two women seem to add a "double dose of a middle-class 'feminine' approach to parenting" (2010, p. 11). Second, they say that two women appear to share parenting tasks and child involvement in a more egalitarian way than many married heterosexual couples, at least according to parent reports. Then there is the confounding factor of choice. Around half of pregnancies among heterosexual couples are unplanned (Henshaw, 1998), while many lesbian and gay parents who have a child together make a conscious choice to become parents. One would assume that those who make a conscious choice to become parents may have more motivation for parenting investments. Clearly, comparisons are difficult and more research needs to be done. In attempting to summarize the current research, we can say with a fair amount of confidence that when comparing children raised in homosexual versus heterosexual two-parent contexts, child outcomes *and* parenting investments are similar.

What about the lack of a male figure? Just as single fathers who parent without women assume more traditional "mothering" tasks and as two gay male parents assume traditional "mothering" tasks, women who parent without men take on some of the traditional "fathering" tasks (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Goldberg, 2010). Again, there is far more evidence that a parent's biological sex does not determine whether they are a good parent as much as their ability to be consistently involved and invested in their child (Parke 2002; West & Turner, 1995). Still, lesbian mothers report that they consciously make efforts to insert positive male role models in the lives of their children, either through other male family members or friends (Goldberg, 2010).

One challenge faced by lesbian and gay parents stems from how to construct a family identity (Goldberg, 2010). To begin, one distinction among children in same-sex relationships is whether (1) the child entered the family in the context of a heterosexual relationship that eventually dissolved when one partner came out as lesbian or gay, or (2) whether the child was born or adopted by parents who already had a lesbian or gay identity (Patterson, 2000). Patterson (2002) describes that children of the first type are more likely to experience stress and reorganization somewhat akin to divorce, unlike children of the second type who have not experienced these transitions. Even for children who are adopted or born into a family with same-sex parents, establishing and legitimizing a family identity is important. Bergen, Suter, and Daas (2006) found that nonbiological lesbian mothers especially relied on symbols such as same last names, familial address terms, and other legal processes to establish this identity. Legitimized parental status is important as children become involved in contexts such as school, health care, and other social activities that require parental representation. Establishing joint family identity is also important for internal family functioning. Sometimes feelings of competition and jealousy arise between the parent who is biologically related to the child and the one who is not (Goldberg, 2010). Stressing a joint family identity may ease some of these tensions.

Many lesbian and gay parents say they want to model openness and pride about their family identity to the public, but they acknowledge that they must manage this openness in a way that protects their child from harassment or ridicule from peers and the community (Goldberg, 2010). In spite of challenges related to harassment or establishment of family identity, gay and lesbian parents believe that their children might experience some benefits from their family form: They may grow up tolerant of diversity and have likely been exposed to egalitarian family roles (Goldberg, 2010).

One striking feature about research on gay and lesbian parenting is that there has been far more attention devoted to lesbian parents than gay male parents. This may be in part because there are more lesbian parents. For good reason, some have criticized studies that apply findings from lesbian parents to gay parents or studies that mix lesbian and gay parents together and then make claims about one group or the other (Cameron, 2009). Because gay male parents remain so underresearched, there is less conclusive evidence about parenting practices and child outcomes among gay male parents. Even so, Stacey (2006) speculates that because gay male parents have more limited options and legal barriers for getting to parenthood (e.g., adoption, foster care, surrogacy), the few couples who select into that group may very well be highly motivated to be involved and invested parents.

Parent–Child Interaction and the Parental Relationship

In what way is the quality of the parental or marital relationship linked to the quality of the parent–child relationship? Erel and Burman's (1995) meta-analysis examined two hypotheses regarding this link, the compensatory hypothesis and the spillover hypothesis.

The *compensatory hypothesis* argues that a poor marital relationship prompts a stronger parent–child relationship, or vice versa. In other words, a parent who is dissatisfied in the marriage may seek intimacy and satisfaction in the parent–child relationship and may devote more involvement and investment in the parent–child relationship. The compensatory hypothesis suggests that the involvement and intimacy of a healthy parent–child relationship intrudes on or detracts from the marital relationship. Erel and Burman (1995) found a clear lack of support for the compensatory hypothesis.

The *spillover hypothesis* argues that positive marital relations lead to positive parent–child relations, and alternatively, marital disharmony “spills over” to create parent–child disharmony. Erel and Burman and others since have found strong empirical support for this hypothesis (see also Doohan, Carrère, Siler, & Beardslee, 2009). It appears parents who have a more satisfying and supportive relationship with one another are more available to respond sensitively to the child's needs. Parents who are experiencing distress and conflict in their own relationship are

likely to be irritable and emotionally drained and therefore less attentive, sensitive, and involved with their children (Buehler & Gerard, 2002). Parents may even take out their own frustrations about the marital relationship on the children in the form of harsh discipline or scapegoating (Buehler & Gerard, 2002; Erel & Burman, 1995). In *scapegoating*, the parent focuses on the child's faults and problems as a distraction or outlet for his/her own problems. In addition, children report "feeling caught" in loyalty to their parents when they witness their parents engaging in critical and destructive conflict (Schrodt & Afifi, 2007).

Further contributing to the spillover effect, social learning theory predicts that children's behavior would be influenced by vicariously modeling their parents' behavior. When they observe destructive conflict interactions between their parents, children experience strained parent-child relationships, not to mention poorer problem-solving skills, poorer adjustment, and lower peer competence in their interactions apart from their parents (Buehler & Gerard, 2002; Goodman, Barfoot, Frye, & Belli, 1999). According to Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Papp (2001), this negative spillover is especially evident after children observe their parents involved in physical aggression, nonverbal conflict or the silent treatment, intense conflicts, conflict about child-related themes, and withdrawal.

By contrast, not all marital conflicts result in negative spillover effects. Observing parents deal with interparental conflict constructively may model useful social skills for children. Witnessing constructive conflict, children observe emotion regulation, mutual respect, and develop conflict frames that show conflict can be resolved or progress toward resolution. Likewise, positive family communication about interparental conflict can help children process the conflict. Brown, Fitzgerald, Shipman, and Schneider (2007) found that when mothers initiated discussions with their children to help them process interparental conflict, it improved the children's mental health and prompted children to initiate discussions when they had questions rather than externalizing problems.

We should also note that spillover effects can occur in the opposite direction, such that strained parent-child relations place stress on the marital relationship. Living with a disturbed child or one who requires special care may place stress on parents that spills over to the marital relationship. We discuss this scenario more in our review of nonnormative family stress in chapter 11.

Another way to look at the impact of the marital relationship on the parent-child relationship is to study how people parent alone versus in the presence of their spouse. When alone with the child, many parents act different than when in a triadic relationship (Doherty & Beaton, 2004; McHale, Lauretti, Kuersten-Hogan, & Rasmussen, 2000; Stafford & Bayer, 1993). McHale (1997) introduced the concept of *covert* coparenting processes. Such processes involve interaction between the parent and child when the other parent is absent that either strengthens or undermines the child's sense of family integrity (McHale, Lauretti, Talbot, & Pouquette, 2002, p. 147). For example, when one parent is absent, some parents make disparaging remarks to the child about the absent parent, whereas others make positive, complimentary remarks. When parenting alone, some parents uphold discipline strategies that are consistent with those used in the presence of the other parent, while others introduce inconsistent discipline strategies. McHale et al. (2002) argues that in distressed marriages, parenting is more inconsistent, such that parents exhibit more differences when alone with the child versus with the other parent and child together. In some cases, dysfunctional *cross-generational coalitions or triangulation* develops. In such cases, the spouses are split over some conflict, and one parent "gangs up" with the child against the other parent. Obviously, the child is prone to feel caught in loyalty conflicts between the parents (Buchanan & Waizenhofer, 2001).

CONCLUSION

We opened this chapter by introducing two primary communication themes in parent-child interaction: warmth and control. Well-known parenting typologies, such as Baumrind's

parenting typology and Gottman's emotion coaching style, present how parents approach these themes differently and make recommendations for effective parenting. In general, it appears parents must strike a balance such that their warmth messages are sensitive and consistent yet not overly intrusive. Likewise, control messages are most effective when they provide well-reasoned structure that prompts the child to internalize right and wrong behavior, as opposed to controlling, coercive directives that do not enhance the child's self-competence and emotion regulation. The importance of balancing warmth and control in the parent–child relationship is consistent with Olson's (1993) recommendation for balancing cohesion and adaptability in the whole family system. But what is good parenting might depend on the outcomes that parents' desire for their children and parents' ability to teach skills that will be ecologically and culturally valuable for children.

In the second part of the chapter, we examined parent–child relationships over time, looking at challenges in the exchange of warmth and control as children grow. Parents and children mutually influence each other, and this mutual influence begins upon birth. Infants cry, parents respond, and the attachment bonds between parents and children develop and change with the years. Parents and children alike struggle with maintaining appropriate levels of attachment and control, especially in life stages such as toddlerhood and adolescence.

Finally, in the third part of the chapter, we explored how parent–child interaction is affected by social roles and other family relationships. We studied social roles for being a mother, father, single parent, or gay or lesbian parent, finding that successful parenting is related to interaction more than biological sex. In addition, the relationship between parents affects the parent–child relationship. More often than not, negativity and stress from the marital relationship spills over to the parent–child relationship with negative implications. Parent–child interactions are profound intergenerational family relationships. We shall extend our discussion to adult children and parents in chapter 9.

8 Sibling Communication

Sibling relationships are unique, involuntary family relationships that can last a lifetime. Many sibling relationships are intense, complex, and deeply affected by a shared family history (Mikkelsen, 2006). Other siblings spend little time with each other, perhaps due to differences in age, geographic distance once they become adults, or living arrangements that separate step or half siblings after a divorce and remarriage. It does not take long to notice one theme in the research literature on siblings. That is, sibling interaction varies dramatically depending on factors such as age, sex, birth spacing, birth order, number of siblings, genetic relatedness, the family context within which they originate and exist, and differential treatment by parents.

Many people wonder whether siblings have a positive or negative impact on people's lives. Some young children beg their parents for a baby sister or brother, not fully understanding that the addition of a new sibling will bring changes to family dynamics. As revealed by the research reviewed in this chapter, siblings can have both positive and negative effects on each other in areas such as communication competencies and well-being. For example, sibling relationships are characterized by frequent and intense conflict (Katz, Kramer, & Gottman, 1992) and also remarkable caregiving and support (Stafford, 2004). Cicirelli (1996) may have said it best: At any stage, the sibling relationship may be marked by feelings as different as "closeness, rivalry, or indifference" (p. 67). In the last two decades, researchers have stepped up attention to adult siblings, balancing the traditional focus on siblings in childhood. Even though sibling contact waxes and wanes throughout adulthood, most siblings make intentional efforts to maintain the relationship beyond their obligatory family ties. As we review later in this chapter, these maintenance efforts appear beneficial, given that the sibling relationship is a common source of support and shared history late in life.

DEFINING SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

Cicirelli (1996) describes sibling types as they vary by biological and legal ties. *Full siblings* have common biological parents and share much of their genetic make-up, with 33% to 66% of their genes in common. Full siblings often share many aspects of their environment. Because of this shared history, many people turn to their full sibling relationships for validation about childhood experiences (Teti, 2002). However, sharing the same environment does not mean siblings will experience that environment in the same way.

Sibling research is still dominated by studies on full siblings, although researchers are beginning to devote attention to other sibling types. *Half siblings* share just one biological parent, whereas *step siblings* share no biological parents but are linked by the marriage of their parents. Reviewing research on sibling forms, Tillman (2008) reports that about half of stepfamilies include children from both parents and over half of remarried parents give birth to at least one child within a few years of marriage (p. 91; see also Ganong & Coleman, 1994;

Wineberg, 1990). Tillman notes that adolescence, a time already full of many transitions, is also a common time for children to experience the addition of a step or half sibling.

Children with remarried parents give priority to their full siblings over half and step siblings in part by expressing more emotional engagement and social support to their full siblings (Ganong & Coleman, 1994; White and Reidmann, 1992a). Later in life, even though people have significantly lower contact with their half and step siblings as compared to full siblings, they still maintain some contact throughout adulthood. White and Reidmann note that only 5% of step siblings are so estranged that they do not even know where their step sibling lives. Having no full siblings encourages more contact with step and half siblings.

There is some evidence that children who live with step or half siblings are negatively impacted. Much of this evidence stems from research originally intended to look at the effects of stepparents on children. In the upcoming chapter on stepfamilies (chapter 13), we review a body of research that shows how two parents are often better than one, except when the second parent is a stepparent. Many of the problems with stepparents are attributed to the stress and confusion children experience as they adjust to a new parent, and the new roles, routines, boundaries, discipline, and interaction that come with the new parent. But something else comes with many new stepparents: children. Studies that only look at stepparent–stepchild interaction may miss the impact of the whole new family context (Tillman, 2008). In blended families, children may be getting used to a new parent and new siblings in the house all at once. Children who live with a step or half sibling have more behavior problems at school and lower achievement scores at school (Strow & Strow, 2008; Tillman, 2008). Half siblings experience a unique tension because one child is living with both biological parents and the other is not. Tillman (2008) and others acknowledge that this situation may breed feelings of inequality, jealousy, insecurity, and stress for children (p. 92).

Adoptive siblings are the result of the legal adoption of a child into the family. Finally, *fictive siblings* represent people who have been labeled sibling, perhaps due to custom or affection, although there is no biological or legal connection. For example, sometimes outsiders are taken into a family and treated as a brother or sister.

PRE-ADULT SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

Pre-Adult Sibling Contact and Relationship Types

During childhood, those who have siblings spend more time in the presence of their siblings than any other family relationship. McHale and Crouter (1996) found that 11-year olds spent about 33% of their out-of-school time (close to 3 hours a day) in the presence of their siblings. Behind the sibling relationship, relationships with mothers took up about 23% of children's time.

Most children experience the birth of a sibling within the first 4 years of their life (Baydar, Hyle, & Brooks-Dunn, 1997). Dunn (1983) describes how birth spacing can invoke two different types of sibling relationships. *Reciprocal sibling relationships* are characterized by siblings who interact in a peer-like way by engaging in similar experiences with one another. Reciprocal relationships are usually seen in siblings who are close in age, developmental status, or interests. Children in a reciprocal sibling relationship often play together at the same level. The reciprocal sibling relationship offers children an opportunity to refine peer-related social skills and to practice developmental competencies (McCoy, Brody, & Stoneman, 2002). Siblings close in age also compete for similar resources, toys, and parental attention. This may explain why siblings who are close in age are prone to more sibling rivalry, as compared to siblings farther apart in age (Minnett, Vandell, & Santrock, 1983).

Complementary sibling relationships occur in siblings who are at different developmental stages and competencies, usually because of a larger age difference. During interaction, the

older sibling fulfills the caregiver, teacher, or leader role. The younger sibling is guided by the older sibling and imitates the older sibling's behavior. As Teti (2002) describes, complementary sibling relationships sometimes take on elements of the parent-child relationship (i.e., the older or more powerful sibling acts as a parent to the other sibling). Even though complementary relationships theoretically have some prosocial effects (e.g., the older siblings can help, teach, and care for younger siblings), the hierarchical dynamics can sometimes bring out overpowering negative effects. This is exactly what Karos, Howe, and Aquan-Assee (2007) found for 5th and 6th grade children who had complementary sibling relationships. The complementary sibling interactions were related to more upsetting daily exchanges, whereas the reciprocal sibling interactions were related to more pleasant daily exchanges. As Karos et al. explain, sometimes complementary interactions are intended to be prosocial, but they are "interpreted by the helpee as the sibling's attempt to dominate or gain control under the guise of generosity" (p. 591).

During adolescence and even adulthood, the way siblings exchange advice and support is one indicator of whether they have a reciprocal or complementary relationship. Siblings in a reciprocal relationship are more likely to exchange advice in an egalitarian way. In a complementary sibling relationship, the older sibling gives advice and the younger sibling seeks advice, nurturance, or life direction (Buhrmester, 1992; Tucker, Barber, & Eccles, 1997). In adulthood, age becomes a less reliable indicator of whether siblings have a reciprocal or complementary relationship. Siblings commonly develop more egalitarian, or reciprocal, relationships in adulthood, regardless of age differences (Tucker et al., 1997). The increasing competence of younger siblings appears to diminish the power differentials (Buhrmester & Furman, 1990).

The Transition to Siblinghood

Family systems theorists propose that the introduction of a sibling to the family system causes major stress, or change, for all members of the family system, including the older sibling. Psychodynamic interpretations from the early to mid part of the 1900s characterized the stress introduced by a sibling as a negative force for the older sibling (Teti, 2002). The birth of a younger sibling was thought to induce rivalry and jealousy on the part of the older sibling, as well as resentment regarding the attention parents devote to the newborn. Is there any evidence to support these claims?

There may in fact be some detrimental effects related to the introduction of a sibling. However, the detrimental effects are not directly related to the introduction of the sibling per se, but rather to other changes in the family system that may accompany the sibling. The *resource dilution hypothesis* proposes that positive parenting resources and behaviors decrease with the addition of a sibling (Strohschein, Gauthier, Cambell, & Kleparchuk, 2008). There is mixed evidence for this hypothesis. Strohschein et al. discovered a decrease in positive interaction in homes that added a sibling versus those that did not. Similarly, Brooks-Gunn (1997) found that sometimes the introduction of an additional child leaves less time for positive parent-child interaction with the older child and prompts parents to increase their controlling and punitive communication behaviors. This is detrimental to the older child's development. In addition, the introduction of a sibling, particularly when closely spaced in age, takes a toll on the economic well-being of the family. The additional child places more stress on the system overall and means parents may not be able to afford activities and opportunities for the older child. Blake (1989) found that people from families with four children receive on average a year less schooling than those from families with two children, because resources are spread thinner. In addition, the birth of a younger sibling is related to an increase in behavioral problems in preschool and elementary school-aged children (Baydar, Hyle, & Brooks-Gunn, 1997). However, these behavioral problems are temporary and usually diminish in about a year. Baydar, Hyle et al. (1997) also note that increases in behavior problems are based on reports by mothers, who may simply perceive more behavior problems as a result of their own stress associated with a new baby.

To the contrary, there may also be some positive or at least neutral effects from the introduction of a sibling. When a sibling is born, families are less likely to rely on day care, now that they have the expense of two children versus one. In certain cases, older siblings benefit from less day care and a parent who is solely focused on the children (Baydar, Greek, & Brooks-Gunn, 1997). Indeed, Strohschein et al. (2008) found that resources were not necessarily diluted when siblings were added, but rather “reallocated.” For example, when a sibling was added, parents engaged in more focused and consistent parenting. They focused their limited time better and sometimes adopted a “managerial approach to raising their children by reorganizing and reallocating parenting resources to balance and meet the needs of all family members” (Strohschein et al., 2008, p. 681).

Further, some older siblings react in a positive and nurturing way to the birth of a sibling. At first, the older sibling may help with newborn care by dressing, diapering, feeding, and holding/touching the baby (Nadelman & Bagun, 1982). Later the older sibling may teach, lead, or take responsibility for the growing sibling. These nurturing skills are important lessons that can pay off for older children later in life, when they are called upon to use nurturing, teaching, or leading skills in a job or use caregiving skills in their own family of orientation (Teti, 2002). Cicirelli (1994) cautions, however, that the benefits older children experience from enacting a caregiver role are curvilinear. Moderate caregiving by older siblings enhances academic achievement, but heavy caregiving responsibilities hinder older siblings’ academic achievement because they do not have time to attend to their own responsibilities. Overall, Teti (2002) suggests that a high quality, secure relationship between parents of the older child before the birth of the sibling promotes children’s adjustment to the birth of a sibling.

Box 8.1 Family Size: From Only Children to Mega Families . . . Or What about No Children?



When most elementary school children are asked to draw a picture of a “family,” they either draw their own family or a picture that fits their prototype of a “normal” family. Based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau and other demographers, most of these pictures will show just a couple of kids at most. According to Schwede (2007) the average U.S. family size is 3.14. By ethnicity, average family sizes are as follows: non-Hispanic White (2.97), African American (3.34), American Indian (3.44), Alaskan Native (3.47), Asian (3.60), and Hispanic (3.93).

But the media has a fascination for outliers. When it comes to family size, mega families represent interesting outliers. According to one mega family website (<http://www.megafamilies.com/>), mega families are recognized as those families who feel a 15 passenger van is not “roomy enough.” Indeed families with large numbers of children are becoming increasingly rare. From 1970 to 2003, the percentage of family groups that had four or more children decreased from 17% to 5% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). It is perhaps because big families are becoming increasingly novel that reality shows such as *19 Kids and Counting*, *Kate Plus Eight*, and *Sextuplets Take New York* are so intriguing to viewers. According to Avins (2002) people watch reality shows like voyeurs, relishing the comedy, fairytale, and tragedy all with a mix of disbelief and awe. After watching the show, they turn off the television and forget about the show, as if it were just a story. But when people heard about “realistic” news reports of single “Octomom” Nadya Denise Doud-Suleman Gutierrez’s birth to octuplets (in addition to her six young children at home), they reacted differently. Gutierrez received death threats, and a vandal even threw an infant car seat through the window of her minivan. Public outrage centered on the suspicion that she would not be able to adequately care for the children as well as clashing values about in-vitro fertilization.

How do mega families cope with the demands of so many children? Recall the *resource dilution hypothesis*, which proposes that positive parenting resources and behaviors decrease with the addition of a sibling (Strohschein et al., 2008). For sure, parents in mega families have to adopt a more managerial style of parenting to reallocate resources, deal with daily demands, and find some time for their own relationship, if that is possible. The Duggar family, of the show *19 Kids and Counting*, says they use a buddy system, whereby an older sibling is assigned to a younger sibling to assist in primary care and education. One has to question whether this results in strain on the older child, if it teaches them a sense of responsibility and childrearing skills, or some combination. Cicirelli (1994) cautions that heavy caregiving responsibilities hinder older siblings’ academic achievement because they do not have time to attend to their own responsibilities. In addition, mega families face enormous financial burdens, which may be one reason Blake (1989) found that people from families with four children receive on average a year less schooling than those from families with two children, because resources are spread thinner.

Counter to the mega family phenomenon, more and more couples are opting for only children. The media also shows sporadic interest in this trend. For example, Lauren Sandler’s July 19, 2010, cover story in *Time Magazine* was titled “The Only Child Myth.” As the title suggests, Sandler challenges age-old stereotypes about only children as selfish, aloof, overly autonomous, and privileged. Instead, Sandler describes only children as not so different from children with siblings. Most researchers agree. In yet to be published research, Bobbitt-Zeher and Downey explain that children with siblings may be prompted to develop peer-related social skills at an earlier age as they try to play with a sister or brother. However, by the time only children are in high school, years of peer interaction in school and other activities make their social skills virtually indistinguishable from children with siblings (Grabmeier, 2010). In addition, many

parents of only children say that finances played a big role in their conscious decision to have only one child (Sandler, 2010). Costs of a college education, child care, and even basic necessities can be daunting just for one child.

Still another option is no children. According to Durham and Brathwaite's (2009) review of voluntary child-free couples, the number of couples choosing to remain child free continues to grow, especially among dual-earner couples and highly educated couples. Child-free couples often face social stigma in a society that seems to expect couples to have children. In addition, some child-free couples find the decision about whether to have children or not challenging, especially when spouses disagree or feel family pressure to have children. This is a private decision that couples approach differently (see Durham and Brathwaite, 2009). Finally, many couples want to have children but are not able, or are faced with difficult decisions about what role, if any, they want technology to play in their ability to become pregnant. Sometimes, these dilemmas fundamentally reshape a couple's relationship.

Prosocial Behaviors in Pre-Adult Siblings: Caregiving, Support, and Socialization

Caregiving and Support

Until researchers began to systematically study sibling relationships in the 1970s, siblings were primarily characterized in terms of rivalry and competition (Teti, 2002). However, Gillies and Lucey (2006) argue that siblings do more to increase than decrease family social capital. Social capital generally refers to the resources that people acquire through their relationships (Gillies & Lucey, 2006). Siblings appear to provide many prosocial behaviors for one another beginning with caregiving and support resources. Indeed in some contexts, such as non-Western cultures or lower-income families in the U.S., older siblings are called upon to a great extent to care for younger siblings (Brody, Stoneman, Smith, & Gibson, 1999; Teti, 2002). At a very early age, siblings can display support and caregiving skills. Dunn and Kendrick (1982) found that siblings as young as 2 and 3 years old appeared to be in touch with their younger brother's or sister's feelings. These toddlers could comment to their parents about their infant siblings' emotional state or what they thought the infant liked or disliked. In turn, younger siblings very soon become attached to their older siblings, sometimes turning to them for comfort or security, especially in the absence of a parental caregiver. In addition, preschool age children who have a good relationship with their closest in age sibling (as reported by mothers) appear to have fewer behavioral problems at preschool and at home (Modry-Mandell, Gamble, & Taylor, 2007).

There is some evidence that sibling relationships become less close from 3rd grade to 12th grade, in comparison to younger ages (Buhrmester & Furman, 1990), or at least that they spend less time together as they become more invested in individual activities. However, siblings who can maintain some sense of warmth and closeness in their late childhood and adolescence seem to benefit. In a recent study of African American adolescent siblings, Soli, McHale, and Feinberg (2009) found that adolescents were less depressed and felt more feelings of connectedness and bonding to school when they had a good sibling relationship, in the context of a home with strong familism values. Adolescents who experienced a lot of relationship aggression in their sibling interactions, as well as low familism, were more depressed and less connected to school. This study evidences both the protective and risk factors that sibling relationships can spur, depending on the quality of the relationship.

During middle childhood and adolescence, siblings sometimes show support to one another in the face of life events with a negative impact (Dunn, 1996). However, Dunn is quick to note that siblings do not grow closer in response to all negative life events. In Dunn's research, most of the negative life events around which siblings reported drawing closer were not severe life events. In the case of marital discord and divorce, the evidence is mixed (see Rocca et al., 2010). In some cases, siblings can be a source of support and nurturance during divorce. But there is also considerable evidence to support the spillover hypothesis (Yu & Gamble, 2008). That is, negative marital quality results in more negative sibling relationships (see Box 8.2).

Box 8.2 Does Parental Divorce Affect Sibling Relationships?

Among family scientists it is generally agreed that parental divorce loosens the bonds between parents and their children, especially in the case of non-custodial parents. However, what effect if any does parental divorce have on relationships between siblings? Two studies of predominantly young adults in their early 20s show that divorce may be associated with less positivity and greater turmoil in sibling relationships. Young adults whose parents divorced when they were between the ages of 9–18 recall fewer positive feelings toward their sibling in adulthood than young adults whose parents never divorced (Riggio, 2001). These same young adult children of divorced parents reported that they engaged in fewer positive behaviors with their sibling during childhood. It is interesting that the participants in Riggio's study did not report any such negative effects on their sibling relationships if the parental divorce occurred early in their lives, before age 8. A related investigation corroborated these findings by showing that the offspring of divorced parents perceive their sibling relationships as less close and less supportive than siblings of parents with intact marriages (Milevsky, 2004). The young adult children of divorced parents also communicated less with their siblings in comparison to those with parents who never divorced. Does this mean that parental divorce permanently drives a wedge into sibling relationships? Not necessarily. There is reason to believe that the effects of parental divorce on sibling relationships might dissipate as siblings get older. A study of almost 3000 sibling dyads ranging in age from 14–85, with an average age of almost 45, found no significant effects for parental divorce on sibling contact and relationship quality. However, these siblings did report significantly more conflict in their relationships than siblings whose parents had never divorced. At first, this may seem paradoxical. How could siblings of divorced parents report more conflict but the same relationship quality as siblings from parents with intact marriages? Perhaps the answer lies in the normalization and habituation of family conflict that may occur in households with divorcing parents. Just as research on marriage shows that conflict does not necessarily preclude marital satisfaction, especially among more "volatile" couples, perhaps siblings who have a history of observing high levels of family conflict can engage in such conflict among themselves, but still remain as satisfied with their sibling relationships as those siblings who never observed such high levels of family conflict. The process of habituation occurs when people are repeatedly exposed to some stimulus and that stimulus produces a weaker and weaker reaction with each repeated exposure. Perhaps some sibling dyads get so used to family conflict when they are growing up that it never strikes them as out of the ordinary or as a sign of trouble in their relationship. The research on this phenomenon also suggests that the experience of higher conflict without damage to perceived relationship quality among siblings of divorced parents might be something that comes with the experience and wisdom of advanced age and the benefit of more time since the parental divorce.

Socialization

In addition to caregiving and support, there is no doubt that siblings actively socialize one another. The sibling relationship is often called a “training ground” for social skills and peer competencies (Parke & Buriel, 1998; Stafford, 2004). In this training ground, siblings experiment with positive, prosocial behaviors (e.g., skills for comforting, empathy, conflict management, or academic achievement) and negative, antisocial behaviors (e.g., aggression, teasing, or risky and delinquent behaviors). As for prosocial behaviors, Tucker, Updegraff, McHale, and Crouter (1999) explored how older siblings socialize empathy and perspective-taking skills in younger siblings. Earlier research has suggested that children with siblings have better perspective-taking skills than only children (Perner, Ruffman, & Leekam, 1994). Minus some exceptions, Tucker et al. found that simply having a sibling is not what encourages the development of perspective-taking skills, but rather having a good relationship with a sibling. In general, when siblings reported a positive relationship and when the older sibling exhibited positive behaviors (e.g., doing nice things for the sibling, trying to make the sibling feel better), younger siblings exhibited more empathy. One notable exception was that younger sisters’ empathy was enhanced even when they had older sisters who were negative (e.g., hurt the sibling, were mean to the sibling). Tucker et al. speculated that either (1) it was adaptive for the younger sisters to be empathically aware of their hostile older sisters’ feelings in order to defend themselves or (2) girls in general are socialized to feel more responsible for the negative feelings of others.

Certainly sibling relationships are not the only place children can learn empathy and perspective-taking skills. Children are influenced by other peer relationships, like friendships. This may be one reason why Kitmann, Cohen, and Lockwood (2002) found that the quality of elementary school age (6–12 years) *only* children’s friendships was no lower than children who had siblings. However, even though the only children in Kitmann et al.’s (2002) study had similar quality friendships as children with siblings, these only children were more likely to be victimized and aggressive in their peer group. Kitamann et al. suggest that having a sibling may help children learn important conflict management skills at an earlier age in life. Only children likely still learn conflict management skills as they interact with peers in the context of school. But having a younger sibling challenges children to learn to deal with conflict in more frequent and acute ways during the years prior to peer interaction in school.

There is also evidence that older siblings socialize younger siblings in the domain of parent–child conflict. Shanahan, McHale, Osgood, and Crouter (2007) conducted a fascinating study in which they followed families over 5 years, beginning as the oldest child entered adolescence. Their intent was to observe how family conflict patterns changed with the onset of adolescence for the oldest child and as the next youngest sibling entered adolescence. Siblings in the study were an average of 2.61 years apart. To begin, they found evidence for spillover effects in parent–child conflict. As the oldest siblings entered adolescence, conflict between the parents and the oldest siblings increased in frequency. This was no surprise—conflict typically increases as children enter adolescence. The surprise was that when conflict with parents increased for the oldest siblings, conflict with parents also increased for the younger siblings, even though the younger siblings were not in adolescence but in late childhood. Shanahan et al. explained the spillover effects in the following ways. It may have been that second borns became caught up in some of the family conflict. Norms for family conflict may have simply become higher overall. Or, it may have been that parents applied new tactics of monitoring and control across the board with all children in the family, even though the desire for monitoring and control stemmed from the older child’s behavior. Naturally, younger children might disagree, especially if they felt they had to face the consequences of a problem they did not cause.

The next interesting twist in results in the Shanahan et al. (2007) study was that conflict frequency between parents and second borns did not increase as second borns entered adolescence. It might be that conflict levels had already become high in families. Or parents and

children may have worked out disagreements at an earlier age with second borns, such that the transition to adolescence did not spur new conflict. Yet another hypothesis, suggested by Shanahan et al., is that learning from experience, parents may have been motivated to find and adapt effective skills for dealing with firstborn adolescent children the first time around that proved useful when dealing with secondborns' entry to adolescence.

To this point, we have reviewed how siblings socialize each other with regard to empathy and conflict management. Siblings teach numerous other skills. Some scholars are just as interested in *how* siblings teach each other versus *what* they teach each other. Recchia, Howe, and Alexander (2009) compared the strategies firstborns (who averaged 6 years old) and secondborns (who averaged 4 years old) used to teach their sibling how to construct a toy. The sibling who was in the teacher role received training from a research assistant about how to construct a 20-piece toy. They children had to demonstrate competence in the toy's construction to the research assistant before beginning to teach the sibling who had never seen the toy. As teachers, secondborns taught in a more learner-centered, collaborative ways. Describing firstborns who were in the unusual role of having their younger sibling teach them, Recchia et al. concluded the following. "Firstborn learners are unlikely to be passive and allow their less advanced sibling to monopolize the interaction and may engage in behaviors that ensure their involvement in the task (e.g., asking questions, actively attempting to build)" (p. 71).

As teachers, firstborns in the Recchia et al. (2009) study elicited less involvement from the learner. That is, firstborns were more likely to just show the younger sibling by taking over and constructing the toy for them, rather than trying to teach the younger sibling to do it. Recchia et al. suggest that this teaching pattern is reflective of sibling hierarchy. Firstborns likely see their younger siblings as less competent and in need of help. It should be noted that those firstborns who were chronologically older (some firstborns in the study were as old as 9) were better at teaching their younger siblings in a scaffolding manner, rather than dominating and doing the project for them.

Pre-Adult Sibling Competition, Conflict, and Antisocial Behaviors

We cannot assume that siblings always promote positive socialization effects and prosocial behaviors. Siblings sometimes inhibit social competencies and socialize negative behaviors (Stafford, 2004). Just as siblings can learn useful conflict management skills from one another, they can also learn and model aggressive behaviors (Bank, Patterson, & Reid, 1996; Patterson, Dishion, & Bank, 1984). In addition, many siblings socialize risky behaviors in one another. For example, alcohol use by a nearby sibling is a risk factor for adolescent drinking and alcohol abuse (Conger & Rueter, 1996; see also chapter 15). One plausible reason is that alcohol use by an older sibling models, facilitates, and legitimizes drinking and an association with friends who drink.

Sibling relationships are commonly noted for their competition and conflict. To some extent this characterization is true. Some amount of conflict and discord is normative in sibling relationships. In fact, nonaggressive sibling conflict may actually promote social development and teach children to tolerate negative affect and manage conflict (Katz, Kramer, & Gottman, 1992; Kramer & Baron, 1995). However, conflict between siblings can become destructive and extreme. Nearly 70% of young adults admit that they "committed at least one violent act against their closest-age sibling during their senior year of high school. . . Most common acts were pushing or shoving, throwing things, and hitting a sibling with a hand or object. Physically restraining, slapping, punching, and pulling hair also occurred frequently" (Hoffman, Kiecolt, & Edwards, 2005, p. 1123). Among sibling pairs, brother to brother physical violence is most common (Hoffman et al.).

Prolonged hostile conflict among siblings is detrimental for children's well-being. Stocker, Burwell, and Briggs (2002) found that such conflict predicted children's increased anxiety,

depressed mood, and delinquent behavior. Extreme conflict among siblings also predicts disturbed behavior into adulthood (Patterson, 1982). Naturally, the more verbally aggressive messages (i.e., messages that attack a person's self-concept to deliver psychological pain) individuals receive from their siblings, the less satisfied they are with their sibling relationship (Teven, Martin, & Newpauer, 1998). Stocker et al.'s sophisticated research methods even allow us to conclude that the influence of sibling conflict on child well-being is independent of the influence of hostile conflict behaviors from parents.

Siblings are prone to rivalry and competition, particularly when they feel resources are in short demand. Sometimes the resources siblings vie for are tangible (e.g., toys), other times the resources are intangible (e.g., parental attention). Ram and Ross (2008) asked sibling pairs averaging ages 4 and 8 to try to divide five toys between themselves. Half the sibling dyads were prompted by research assistants to individually rate their interest in the five toys and then share why they were most interested in those toys with their sibling. After each sibling shared his or her interests and reasoning, they were then tasked with dividing up the five toys. In the control group, the sibling pairs were asked to share information about their preferences on a random topic, like food, and then they were asked to divide the toys. The siblings who were in the group prompted to share information about what toys they wanted and to offer reasons for their interest achieved the most mutually satisfying outcomes and the most creative or integrative solutions. This study suggests some take-home advice for parents who frequently deal with young siblings who fight over toys. Parents could encourage children to talk about their interests and reasoning, before immediately grabbing a desired toy from a sibling. Grabbing the toy likely leads to contention and emotional flooding. Requesting a toy by sharing information about interests and reasons may lead the children themselves to avenues for integrative solutions.

Are there other productive ways to curb destructive sibling conflict and competition? In a unique study, Kramer and Radey (1997) tested whether 4–5-year-old siblings who were exposed to social skills training to get along with their younger siblings actually made prosocial improvements in their interaction. The researchers took baseline measurements of the siblings' interaction in their home before the training. The multi-week training involved instruction, modeling, role-playing, and positive feedback in the research laboratory as well as in the home. For example, facilitators discussed ways to initiate play with a younger sibling and appropriate versus inappropriate behaviors. The training also involved modeling with dolls that they pretended to be siblings, as well as free-play time in which siblings were prompted or praised for their behavior. The researchers set up a control group who read books and watched videos about how to get along with siblings, but received no direct instruction. Compared to the control group, those who received the direct social skills training demonstrated more of the social skills they learned during actual interaction later on. Parents of those in the training group reported decreased levels of sibling rivalry, competition, antagonism, power differentials and more sibling warmth. Kramer and Radey concluded that it is possible to teach children effective ways to relate to a sibling early on so as to set the sibling relationship on a positive trajectory.

Interestingly, it appears that siblings often act in ways that preemptively reduce conflict, competition, and social comparisons. *Sibling deidentification* is a process in which individuals attempt to develop an identity unique from their siblings (Schacter, 1982; Teti, 2002). This may happen consciously or unconsciously. Sibling deidentification is most evident in late childhood. During this time, children become aware of their own identity and how they can uniquely shape themselves through the choices they make. A child may differentiate himself or herself from a sibling who excelled in a particular sport or hobby, by choosing an alternative hobby. For example, an older sibling excels in piano, and the younger sibling focuses on sports instead of music. Theoretically, sibling deidentification is more important for siblings who are close in age and competing for the same resources and parental or social attention. There is also some evidence that siblings who get along well tend to exhibit more similarities and less deidentification (Whiteman, McHale, & Crouter, 2007).

Teti (2002) further argues that sibling rivalry and competition can only be understood in the context of the larger family system. What it takes for a sibling to “deidentify” from another is related to the unique expectations of that family system. In some families, sibling deidentification requires carving out a very different niche. In other families, a small shift may be enough to minimize unwanted comparisons (e.g., both siblings participate in track and field, but perform different events).

Parental Involvement and Differential Treatment with Pre-Adult Siblings

How effective are parents at intervening in sibling conflict? Further, to what degree should parents be involved in sibling conflict? Kramer and Baron (1995) describe the real concerns that parents have about how to help their children develop positive sibling relationships. Not only are they concerned about expressions of conflict and antagonism among siblings, but parents are also disturbed when they observe less warmth in the sibling relationship than they expect. As Lisa Belkin (2010), contributing writer for the *New York Times Magazine*, writes, “So many of us have second children in order to give our firstborns a companion through life and then wonder whether we’ve introduced them to a lifetime of fighting” (para. 4). It might be that some parental expectations for siblings to get along with each other are unrealistic in light of children’s developmental levels (Kramer & Baron). For example, some children are too young to understand the concept of sharing with a sibling.

When siblings are in conflict, parents face the dilemma of whether to step in and solve the problem, let the kids work the problem out on their own, or indirectly coach them. Several factors appear to make a difference: the severity of the conflict, the developmental stage of the child, and the existing quality of relationship between the siblings. In severe and violent conflicts most parents feel compelled to step in. They usually take the side of the perceived victim, especially if the victim is too young to defend him/herself. Even in less severe conflicts parents often choose to step in. However, siblings in early to middle childhood are more receptive to their parents’ constructive conflict interventions as compared to older siblings, especially if the siblings get along well with each other to begin with (Recchia & Howe, 2009). Siblings who perceive poor relationship quality may not be motivated to respond to even the best of parents’ constructive techniques.

With regard to *adolescent* siblings, Mc Hale et al. (2000) found that parents who try to step in and solve conflicts between siblings usually promote even more negative sibling relationship qualities. Furman and Giberson (1995) concur that parents who try to micromanage their children’s conflicts deny them the opportunity to refine their own conflict management skills. In contrast, positive sibling relationship qualities among adolescents are promoted when parents spend time together in everyday, shared activities with the sibling dyad (McHale et al., 2000). For adolescent children, casually promoting cohesion among the sibling dyad and family unit works better than a direct intervention once problems develop. This more autonomous parenting style fits especially well with adolescents who are typically autonomy-seeking.

Part of what makes it tough for parents who intervene is the danger that siblings will perceive differential treatment on the part of the parent. Differential treatment by parents is actually very common and children are highly aware of it. Kowal, Kramer, Krull, and Crick (2002) discovered that siblings perceive differential treatment in over a third of their parents’ behaviors. Furthermore, siblings agree on the occurrence and direction of differential treatment about a third of the time. A great deal of research suggests that differential treatment of siblings has negative effects, promoting sibling antagonism, resentment, distress, and externalizing behavior problems (Richmond, Stocker, & Rienks, 2005; Teti, 2002). Yet Kowal et al. found that children rate 75% of cases of preferential treatment as fair and tolerable. As Kowal et al. (2002) say, “issues of equity rather than equality appear to be most salient to children, at least during early adolescence” (p. 304). The difference between equity and equality is slight

but important. Equity is about fairness, while equality is about sameness. Imagine that parents have two children, one who participates in cross country and another who participates in tennis. The children are likely concerned about equity—that their parents fairly support each child’s athletic interests by buying proper equipment and attending the events. Supporting each child’s athletic interests may not require equal investments. Parents probably have to put more money into the tennis player’s equipment, buying good shoes and a racket, in comparison to the cross country runner’s equipment, which may be only a pair of good running shoes. Children seem to handle differential treatment better when they perceive the differential treatment to be “logical” and when they already have a positive relationship with their sibling. For example, older siblings may understand that a younger sibling needs to be treated differently given age and developmental demands. What this means is that siblings’ subjective evaluations appear to matter more than their objective evaluations. Subjective evaluations also reveal that some children dislike the fact that they are preferentially treated because it makes them feel awkward that they are getting something that they do not deserve or that creates inequality.

ADULT SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

Adult Sibling Contact

Sibling contact is usually high in childhood, decreases during early to middle adulthood, and then resurges in later adulthood (Myers, Brann, Rittenour, 2008; White, 2001). On average, siblings talk with or visit one another once or twice a month throughout early to middle adulthood (White, 2001). Sisters talk on the phone more, although they do not visit each other more than other sibling pairs (Spitze & Trent, 2006). From age 45 to 85, levels of contact begins to resurge and remain “remarkably stable” in late adulthood (White, 2001).

Several factors lead to declining sibling contact in early adulthood. During adolescence and young adulthood, declines in sibling contact and the sibling bond are consistent with the individuation process that most young adults experience as they physically and psychologically detach themselves from their families of origin. It is common for young adults to launch from home and move to a new geographic location for education or work. Proximity is strongly related to sibling contact. Siblings who remain in close proximity maintain more frequent contact. But even young adults who remain at home with younger siblings increasingly tune their attention toward developing their own social and career agendas.

Adult sibling contact is particularly sensitive to changing social networks. White (2001) remarks that siblings enter the “second tier” in adults’ social networks as the adults’ new family of orientation moves into the “first tier.” Naturally, when adults marry or have their own children, the demands of their new first tier social network take over. When siblings shift to the second tier, people feel less obligated to maintain contact with siblings. Marriage alters siblings’ previous interaction patterns, especially if the new spouse is disliked by the other sibling (Cicirelli, 1996). Even though there is some evidence that having children reduces sibling contact because children demand so much time (Connidis, 1989), there is also another story. In some cases, children boost sibling contact because siblings are concerned about maintaining ties in the form of active relationships with aunts, uncles, and cousins at family events (White, 2001).

Sibling contact also changes in response to life circumstances, although the effects are not always consistent. Siblings with more education and higher incomes have more contact (Treas & Lawton, 1999). Presumably, financial resources facilitate sibling contact, especially when distance is involved. Demanding careers or marital distress can keep siblings apart, but not always. Marital dissolution can actually lead to increases in sibling contact and exchange, as siblings step in for support. For example, single, divorced, and widowed siblings maintain

more contact than married siblings (Connidis, 1989). Movement in one's first tier social network (e.g., as prompted by divorce) may bump adult siblings back into the first tier, especially if they are a source of support. Another interesting finding is that adult siblings who come from intact families of origin, as opposed to nonintact families, tend to communicate with each other more often, especially when the parents in the intact families have high marital satisfaction (Milevsky, 2004). This supports the idea that marital quality spills over to affect the quality of other family relationships. Rocca et al. (2010) add that siblings from nonintact families are more motivated to communicate with siblings under the condition that the interactions will be pleasurable and fun.

Adult Sibling Closeness and Relationship Maintenance

Although sibling contact fluctuates in adulthood, sibling commitment (i.e., psychological attachment) appears to persist at stable levels across the lifespan (Rittenour, Myers, & Brann, 2007). Cicirelli (1996) argues that even when adult siblings are separated by distance, as is often the case in adulthood, or even when siblings spend minimal time together, the relationship still exists in their minds and sentiment. Interestingly, living far away from a sibling may actually promote more exchanges of emotional support (Voorpostel & Van Der Lippe, 2007). Geographically distant siblings may not be able to offer much tangible support and assistance on a daily basis. But Voorpostel and Van Der Lippe were surprised to find that greater distance increased rather than decreased the amount of emotional support siblings felt they received from one another. Because geographically distant siblings are not able to see each other as much, when they are able to visit they probably spend a large percentage of time together talking about their personal lives and connecting emotionally.

Sometimes adult siblings are able to enact their commitment behaviorally. They do so in many different ways that largely mirror behavioral indicators of commitment in other close relationships. Myers and Bryant (2008) detail the 11 most common behavioral indicators of sibling commitment among emerging adults. They include: support (tangible, emotional, informational, esteem, and network), everyday talk, shared activities, verbal expressions, non-verbal expressions, protection, and play.

Is it that adults remain committed to their sibling relationships because they feel pressure to show loyalty to their family of origin relationships? As Rittenour et al. suggest, some siblings might stay in touch, attend family events, and offer aid to siblings out of larger family obligations. Just as there is some appeal for this obligation hypothesis, there is ample evidence that sibling commitment is connected to feelings of intimacy, relational satisfaction, and communication satisfaction (e.g., supportive communication) (Myers & Bryant, 2008; Rittenour et al.). In other words, many siblings remain committed to each other in adulthood not because they have to but because they already have a good relationship that they want to maintain. One theme that emerges in the research is that adult sibling relationships are a unique blend of voluntary and obligatory investment.

Two-thirds of adults report that a sibling is among their closest friends (White & Riedmann, 1992b). But sex, age, and birth order of siblings are related to some differences in perceptions of sibling closeness, motivations for communicating with a sibling, and relationship maintenance efforts. Among sibling pairs, sisters report feeling closer, exchange more advice and intimate disclosures, are more motivated to communicate with each other for reasons of maintaining the relationship (i.e., inclusion), and indeed use more relationship maintenance behaviors (Myers & Members of COM 200, 2001; Rocca, Martin, & Dunleavy, 2010; Spitze & Trent, 2006; Tucker et al., 1997). Regardless of the sex of their siblings, females report greater intimacy, admiration, and affection for their siblings, more motivation to maintain intimacy, and are more likely to report that a sibling is among a closest friend, as compared to males (Buhrmester, 1992; Clark-Lempers, Lempers, & Ho, 1991; Fowler, 2009; Rocca et al., 2010; Spitze & Trent, 2006).

Even as adults, the birth order of siblings affects motivations for communicating. Older siblings are more likely to say they communicate with their younger siblings for reasons of control, as opposed to younger siblings, who say they are motivated to communicate with older siblings for reasons such as pleasure, relaxation, or fun (Rocca et al., 2010). Regardless of birth order, as adults age they say they communicate with siblings less for reasons of control and more for relational reasons (Fowler, 2009). The more siblings that adults have, the more they report communicating with a sibling for motives of pleasure and relaxation (Rocca et al., 2010). Presumably, people with multiple siblings have options. When they are going to communicate with a sibling, they might as well pick the one they expect to be more enjoyable.

Like friendships and other intimate relationships, sibling relationships require maintenance. "Siblings do not function as a dormant source of support, ready to be activated when there is a need for it. The sibling relationship needs maintenance" (Voorpostel & Van Der Lippe, 2007, p. 1280). Siblings who report more closeness and satisfaction with their relationship enact more relationship maintenance behaviors, just as maintenance behaviors likely drive satisfaction (Fowler, 2009; Myers, Brann, & Rittenour, 2008). Myers and Members of Com 200 (2001) found that adults in their mid to late twenties actively use relationship maintenance behaviors in their sibling relationships. Relationship maintenance behaviors such as positivity, openness, assurances, sharing networks, and sharing tasks were all related to sibling liking.

The most frequently reported maintenance behavior mentioned by young adult siblings in the Myers and Members of Com 200 study was sharing tasks. Openness was least frequent. Siblings reported sharing tasks by helping each other, sharing household chores, sharing care of elderly parents, babysitting, and participating in and putting on family events/holidays. Myers and his students noted that these behaviors are not always fun, but they are an instrumental part of the sibling relationship and represent an attitude of sacrifice and shared burdens. To explain why openness was the least used maintenance behavior, Myers and his students pointed to the idea that sibling relationships are less voluntary and not built on self-disclosure like a romantic relationship or friendship. Siblings tend to be more open with their friends when it comes to most topics, except those that revolve around their parents (Pulakos, 1988). With less openness in the adult sibling relationship compared to friendships, it is common for adults to feel at least some degree uncertainty about their siblings' attitudes and behaviors, which then leads to topic avoidance (Bevan, Stetzenback, Batson, & Bullo, 2006). In a direct comparison of friends and siblings, Van Der Lippe and Voorpostel (2007) found that on the whole, friends and siblings both offer emotional and practical support to adults. But friends tend to offer more emotional support to adults than do siblings; siblings tend to offer more practical support than emotional support. What determines how much emotional support siblings offer to each other? The degree of positive sentiment or intimacy siblings share may be one of the most important factors (Van Der Lippe & Voorpostel, 2007).

Adult Sibling Competition and Conflict

Just as positive sibling behaviors persist into adulthood, negative aspects of the sibling relationship, such as rivalry, verbal aggression, and jealousy, carry over into adulthood. Adults often self-report that these negative behaviors gradually decrease as they age, but interviews with siblings indicate that some degree of rivalry and verbal aggression still persists in adulthood, especially early to mid adulthood (Mikkelsen, 2006; Myers & Bryant, 2008b). With regard to jealousy, more than 75% of the adults (mean age 23) in Bevan and Stetzenbach's (2007) research were able to recall an interaction with a sibling marked by jealousy sometime during the last year. Most of these adults reported that they experience moderate jealousy with their closet in age sibling. Adults also appear to experience more intense and negative emotions as a result of jealousy in sibling relationships, and likewise romantic relationships, as compared to cross-sex friendships (Bevan & Hale, 2006).

In adulthood, sibling rivalry is commonly transformed into comparisons (Adams, 1999). In individualist, success-oriented societies, adult siblings compare “how they are doing” in relation to their siblings, matching up career achievements, financial resources, houses, kids, kids’ achievements, and even parental attention and parental care. Siblings make these comparisons openly and subtly (Adams, 1999). Adult siblings, and especially same-sex siblings, even experience rivalries in collectivist cultures where values for familism are high (Van Volkom, 2006). Thus, forces of sibling rivalry are so strong that they even span culture and age to some extent. How do adults react to rivalry, jealousy, or verbal aggression from a sibling? Unlike young children who deal with sibling conflict in overt ways (e.g., physical violence, yelling), adults, in general, choose less combative tactics. The young adults in Bevan and Stetzenbach’s (2007) study most commonly dealt with jealousy by avoiding/denying those feelings. Similarly, adults who experience verbal aggression from a sibling are likely to avoid communicating with that sibling or minimize the impact of the verbal aggression. Martin, Anderson, and Rocca (2005) found that adults make perceptions that the verbally aggressive sibling is less credible, and they report less satisfaction and trust with the sibling. But there is also some evidence that negative acts such as verbal aggression may not actually have the kind of hurtful impact on the sibling relationship that they would have in other relationships (Myers & Bryant, 2008b). The participants in Myers and Bryant’s (2008b) study literally reported “shrugging off” some of the verbally aggressive comments from siblings (p. 279). The participants suggested that they interpreted messages their siblings said differently, such that their siblings could get by with more negativity than other people could. Many participants seemed to have the attitude that there was nothing their sibling could say that would break the permanent, familial bond of siblinghood (see also Mikkelsen, 2006). This could be because the siblings already had such intense, close, or loyal relationships that could not be washed out by negative comments. Yet theoretically, there seems to be a limit as to how much verbal aggression even a sibling can take.

Adult Sibling Relationship Types

Gold (1989) explains that the way siblings negotiate contact, closeness, involvement, acceptance, emotional and instrumental support, jealousy, and resentment results in five different types of adult sibling relationships, described in Table 8.1.

Gold (1989) found that 78% of adult sibling relationships were intimate, congenial, or loyal types, and the remaining other types were apathetic or hostile. Yet, Bedford (1995) notes that

Table 8.1 Sibling types in adulthood

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| Intimate siblings: | The siblings are highly devoted and psychologically close to one another. They exhibit high affection, acceptance, self-disclosure, and empathy, as well as a lack of envy and resentment. The sibling relationship takes priority over most other relationships. |
| Congenial siblings: | Siblings are affectionate and close, however they clearly place more value on marital and parent-child relationships. |
| Loyal siblings: | The siblings adhere to cultural norms for their relationship. They support each other during times of crisis and see each other at family events. They have regular, but not frequent contact. |
| Apathetic siblings: | The siblings are mutually disinterested in one another and see little of each other because their lives have gone in different directions. They are not, however, hostile or rivalrous. |
| Hostile siblings: | Siblings exhibit strong negative feelings toward one another, in the form of envy, resentment, negative affect, and they are preoccupied with the negative state of the relationship. |

Note. Adapted from Gold (1989).

a majority of adults believe their sibling(s) would come to their aid in crisis, regardless of the quality of their relationship.

Late Adult Sibling Relationships

What is different about sibling relationships in late adulthood? To begin, siblings experience a “substantial resurgence” in contact after age 70 (White, 2001). This does not necessarily mean physically visiting a sibling, but it can include contact through phone and correspondence. While in contact, siblings offer both instrumental and emotional support, however, instrumental support appears to decrease with age (Van Volkom, 2006). As Van Volkom distinguishes, instrumental support is often dependent on geographic proximity and takes forms such as transportation, household help/maintenance, caretaking (or organizing caretaking), financial or legal help/organization. Emotional support is expressed through behaviors such as companionship, advice, sharing problems, sharing memories or reminiscing, and sharing leisure activities (Van Volkom, 2006).

Providing emotional support, through shared memories and reminiscing, may be one of the most important roles a sibling can play in late life. It may even be more important than providing direct aid (Mares, 1995). Other people in an older adult’s social network can provide instrumental help and even other types of emotional support. Indeed, older adults usually call upon spouses and children for direct aid before siblings—older adults can even pay outsiders for instrumental support—but only siblings are poised to share memories dating back to childhood. White (2001) stresses how unique it is that later life siblings share such a life long string of memories: “siblings may be the only members of older individuals’ social network who can not only remember World War II, but who can also remember them in 1940” (p. 566).

Another difference in late adult sibling relationships is that most lingering rivalries have either dissolved or the siblings have become effective at minimizing them (Adams, 1999; Goetting, 1986; Mikkelson, 2006). Sibling rivalry fueled by parents’ preferential treatment appears to negatively impact childhood sibling pairs more than later adult sibling pairs (Riggio, 2000). With parents no longer living, late adult siblings are not so immediately reminded of the differential treatment. Late adult siblings may also be able to put earlier conflicts in perspective or may have simply learned to avoid topics and tactics that generate conflict in their relationship. For example, verbal aggression is used less in late adulthood as compared to young adulthood (Myers & Goodboy, 2006).

With regard to closeness, sister–sister sibling pairs tend to be the most intimate and keep in the most contact later in life, just as in earlier life (Riggio, 2000). Cicirelli (1989) found that older men and women who feel closer to a sister are less depressed than those who do not. Sisters are also likely to help their bereaved sister during the transition to widowhood (Lopata, 1973; Van Volkom, 2006). When grieving the loss of a spouse, one’s children are also grieving the loss of a parent, so turning to a sibling instead of a child may be especially useful. Brother–sister dyads are next closest, and brother–brother sibling pairs least intimate in later life, though some argue that brothers possess strongly intimate feelings about their siblings but they just do not reveal their feelings as outwardly (Bedford & Avioli, 2001). Finally, the death of a sibling “ends a lifelong relationship that includes a huge array of experiences, shared times, and memories. It also reminds the elderly person of his or her own impending death” (Van Volkom, 2006, p. 164).

CONCLUSION

Two primary factors have catapulted sibling relationships to the forefront of many researchers minds: (1) the intensity and complexity of sibling relationships in childhood, and (2) the fact that sibling relationships can be uniquely lifelong family relationships with important benefits

in late adulthood. Family systems theorists propose that the transition to siblinghood can be a major change in one's life, though most children are too young to clearly remember what it was like when their sibling closest in age was born. During childhood, people typically spend more time with their siblings than any other family member. The sibling relationship can be a very intense relationship, especially during childhood. Siblings can be caregivers and confidants as well as competitors and antagonizers. Siblings can socialize with one another in positive and negative ways. Siblings can teach each other empathy and useful conflict management skills, and they can introduce violence and socialize risky behaviors. The sibling relationship is also affected by parental involvement. Siblings are very aware of differential treatment by parents, although children do not always perceive that differential treatment is necessarily negative.

In early and middle adulthood, people spend less time with siblings, but remain emotionally committed to their siblings and count them among their closest friends. Siblings move into the second tier in early adulthood as their own family of orientation shifts to the first tier. Career demands and geographic distance also impinge on sibling contact in adulthood. Some of the rivalry and jealousy experienced in childhood carries even into adulthood, though these feelings gradually decrease with age. In late adulthood, sibling contact resurges. Some older adults rely on siblings for the kind of emotional support and reminiscing that can only be offered by one who has shared the history of a lifetime. Many late life siblings cherish their relationship or at least recognize that they have involuntarily participated in one of the most complex and certainly the most long-lasting family relationships.

9 Extended Family Relationships

The phrase *extended family* refers to “social relationships among those related by blood, law, or self-ascribed association that extends beyond the marriage or committed partner couple and the immediate family of parenting adult(s) and dependent children” (Schmeeckle & Sprecher, 2004, p. 350). Extended family is sometimes referred to as “secondary kin,” and differentiated from immediate family or first-tier kin (Adams, 1999). Family scholars in the U.S. have often treated extended family relationships as peripheral relationships. Indeed, some families themselves place little emphasis on extended family relationships beyond a few obligatory ties. Families toward the other extreme treat “extended family” as a part of the first tier-family. This may be especially the case for families who live in multigenerational units, as they depend upon and cooperate with each other to provide for the family economically, raise children, collaborate on chores, and support one another.

Extended family roles include those such as grandparents, step grandparents, grandchildren, adult children, in-laws, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, and cousins. In this chapter, we devote separate sections to three types of extended family relationships that have received considerable attention, mostly in recent years, from researchers: grandparent–grandchild relationships, adult child–parent relationships, and in-law relationships. Before exploring these specific types of relationships, we highlight a variety of factors that can affect contact and closeness in all types of extended family relationships. These factors include age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, geographic distance, and gender.

FACTORS THAT AFFECT CLOSENESS AND CONTACT IN EXTENDED FAMILIES

Age

Occasionally, extended family members, or even first-tier family members, experience tensions over how they spend their time. For example, some grandparents who desire contact and closeness with their teenage or young adult grandchild may not feel that these desires are reciprocated by their grandchild. Why is it that many adolescents and young adults choose to spend time with new friends over their meaningful family relationships? Socioemotional selectivity theory may help explain why age or, more accurately, age-driven perspectives about how much time is left in life and how to spend it, influence involvement in family relationships.

Carstensen’s (1993, 1995) *socioemotional selectivity theory* proposes that time changes one’s perspective. As people age, their preferences for social contact and social partners change. With limited time left, older adults tend to favor emotionally meaningful relationships (e.g., family relationships or familiar relationships) that have immediate benefits, over unfamiliar, peripheral relationships, even though these unfamiliar relationships may provide access to new

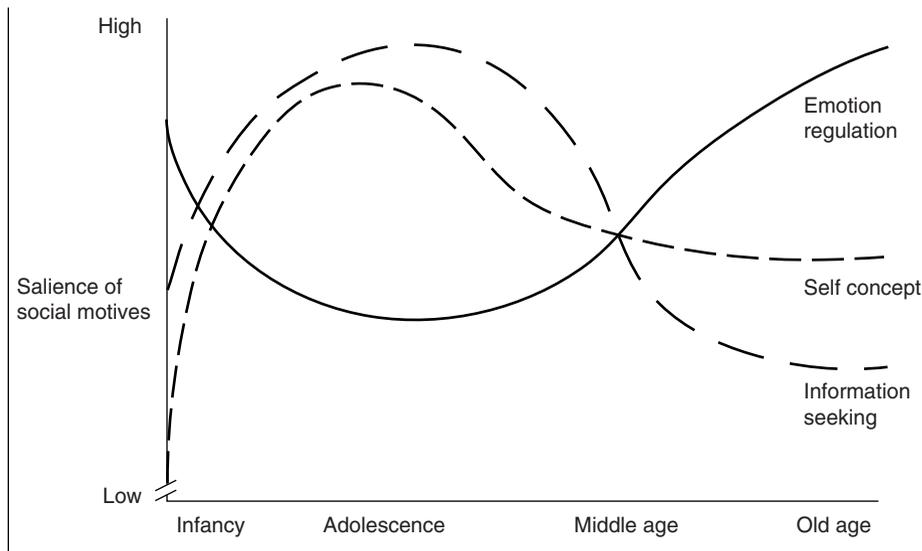


Figure 9.1 Socioemotional selectivity theory: Three salient social motives across the lifespan.

Note. From Evidence for a Life-Span Theory of Socioemotional Selectivity, by L.J. Carstensen, 1995, *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 4, pp. 151–156. Copyright 1995 by Blackwell Publishers. Reprinted with permission.

and exciting experiences and lead to future opportunities. When people perceive that the future is open-ended, as in earlier stages of life, they focus more on the future as opposed to the present. Carstensen more specifically explains three goals that motivate social contact and describes how attention to these goals changes as a result of life stage (see Figure 9.1).

The first goal, *emotion regulation*, refers to the desire for emotional comfort and gratification. This goal is especially strong in infancy, and then again later in life when people invest their limited time in their most emotionally meaningful and immediately satisfying relationships. The goal of *information seeking* prompts people to seek out contact with people who are the best sources, even if those people are novel and unfamiliar. When information seeking, people are trying to understand the world, what other people are like, and what culture is like. Gaining information is useful for developing future opportunities and careers. Carstensen explains that information seeking peaks from adolescence to young adulthood. By later life, people have already experienced careers and multiple experiences. They have “been there and done that.” So the focus later in life is on investing in meaningful relationships in the present. Developing and maintaining *self-concept* is a third social goal that encourages people to consider their place in the social world, consider how they compare with other people, and monitor their view of themselves and other people’s view of themselves. The self-concept goal peaks in adolescence.

As socioemotional selectivity theory predicts, social network size and composition vary by age (Lang & Carstensen, 2002; Lang, Staudinger, & Carstensen, 1998), and these network patterns appear to be similar in European Americans and African Americans (Fung, Carstensen, & Lang, 2001). Very young children and older adults have smaller social networks than do young and middle aged adults. Though smaller, the social networks of very young children and older adults are made up of relationships that are present-oriented, emotionally gratifying, and comfortable. Many older adults and very young children find emotional gratification in their close family relationships. Babies, for instance, do not need a lot of new and exciting, peripheral people in their daily lives, but they do need a few consistent, caring, and emotionally gratifying caregiver relationships. In older age, people again focus their time intensely on what matters

most to them in life, often their emotionally meaningful family relationships. Those older adults who do not have a structural family available, perhaps those who never married, remained childless, or prematurely lost a spouse and children, appear to compensate by investing in a small network of other emotionally meaningful relationships (e.g., close friendships). Such persons still appear to have the same number of emotionally close relationships in later life than those with family available.

Young adults instead prioritize social acceptance, learning, and exposure to the newest and best information. Toward this end, they have larger social networks, comprised of a greater proportion of non-family members. In addition, young and middle aged adults receive more advice from their social networks, as compared to older adults who receive less. In sum, this theory helps describe how age is related to investment in extended family relationships, and even first-tier family relationships.

Ethnicity and Socioeconomic Status

To what extent are contact and closeness in extended family relationships affected by ethnicity and socioeconomic status? Kamo (1998) argues that Confucian regard for *filial responsibility* (i.e., responsibility for parents exercised by children) prescribes many immigrant Asian American families to interact with older extended family by way of respect and obligation. This is manifested in high personal contact, financial and physical support for the elderly, and coresidence involving multigenerational arrangements. Even Asian American families that are not driven by Confucianism, for example Filipino American families, adhere strongly to values of respect and obligation.

In comparison to European American families, traditional Mexican American families are larger, have more frequent intergenerational contact, and have greater expectations for intergenerational assistance (Williams & Torrez, 1998). More recently, Sarkisian, Gerena, and Gerstel (2007) clarified that one of the most dramatic differences between Mexican American and European American families is that Mexican Americans are much more likely to live with or near kin: “more than two thirds of Mexican Americans (67%) but one half of Euro Americans (50%) live with kin or within 2 miles” (p. 51). In addition, Mexican Americans are more likely to give practical assistance to extended family in comparison to European Americans, who are more likely to give financial assistance to extended family (Sarkisian et al., 2007). It is worth pointing out, however, that socioeconomic status seems to be a stronger source of variance than ethnicity when it comes to variables such as extended family contact and assistance. When socioeconomic status is equal, the contact and assistance levels of European American and Mexican American families appear similar (Sarkisian et al., 2007).

Contrary to arguments that most all minority families in the U.S. maintain strong network ties with extended family, Roschelle (1997) argues for careful attention to the nuances. For example, Roschelle’s (1997) research suggests that “African Americans, Chicanos, and Puerto Ricans are not more familistic than non-Hispanic White families. In fact, Anglo men and women give to and receive from network members more child care help and household assistance than do African Americans, Chicanos, or Puerto Ricans” (p. 181). Roschelle concludes that family scholars have exaggerated the idea that present-day minority families participate more actively with extended family out of values for familism. Even when they compared Mexican Americans, a group often high on familism, with European Americans, Sarkisian et al. (2007) found that *both* groups desire to maintain strong network ties with extended family. There are small differences in the way they accomplish the maintenance of these networks ties, as we mentioned previously. But again, socioeconomic status or other family differences may drive extended family network ties as much as ethnic background (Sarkisian et al., 2007).

Many scholars feel that close extended family relationships are a strength of African American families, and this may be especially the case in some economically disadvantaged

families (Perry, 2009). African American family members who live in close proximity often remain in close contact. Like Mexican Americans, African Americans are more likely to live in extended family households than European Americans (Hunter & Taylor, 1998). Although African American extended family living is rooted in African communal life, the present day emphasis on extended family may be driven as much by socioeconomic disadvantage (Perry, 2009, p. 213). For unmarried African American mothers, maternal extended family members frequently provide support and child care, and serve as authority figures to children. Maternal grandmothers are often especially crucial. Other family members can also play supportive roles, even though these roles have not been studied much. For example, Richardson (2009) highlights how some African American uncles are poised to provide social and economic support to African American male youth who live with single mothers. It is worth pointing out that when a single African American mother's extended family is more involved and visits often, the father tends to be less involved (Perry, 2009). There is some debate about whether supportive extended networks of African American single mothers occur "in response to a lack of engagement on the part of the fathers, or whether the fathers disengage because they feel overshadowed by the maternal relatives' presence" (Perry, 2009, p. 221). Single African American fathers' involvement appears to increase if the mother and extended family supports and encourages it (Perry, 2009).

One active part of many African American and Latino kin networks that is not seen as commonly in European American kin networks is *fictive kin* (Schmeeckle & Sprecher, 2004). Fictive kin are treated as relatives though they are not related by blood or law. For example, a close adult female may be assigned the title "aunt" and treated as such, though there is no blood relation. Compared to European Americans, African Americans are more likely to enact the principle of substitution (Luckey, 1994). In substitution, older childless persons treat their nieces and nephews as their own children. Godparents, another type of fictive kin, especially common in Catholic and/or Latino families, represent adults who are given the honor and challenge of providing an additional support network for children.

Debates about who is more familistic are complicated. Factors beyond ethnicity and socioeconomic class are influential. For example, context (e.g., rural vs. urban families), changing cultural or generational values, stages of immigration, and family communication variables likely play important roles. As for context, King and Elder (1995) found that grandparents in rural farm families live closer to and have more contact with their grandchildren than grandparents from nonfarm families. High contact among farm families is especially common on the paternal side when generations share and work farmland together. As for changing generational values, some researchers suggest that differences in kinship ties among ethnic groups in the U.S. are most evident in the oldest generation. Johnson (1995, 2000) found significant differences in the kinship ties of Whites and Blacks, but the differences were among participants in the study who were over 85 years old. Johnson concludes that differences in kinship networks between Whites and Blacks appear among "White oldest old" and "Black oldest old." In Johnson's sample, Black respondents were more involved in family life, received more instrumental and expressive support from family, stayed in more frequent contact with them, and relied on siblings and siblings' children far more than White respondents. The bottom line is that there are still many unanswered questions about how ethnic and socio-contextual factors affect extended family ties, but it is clear that both of these factors influence extended family communication.

Geographic Distance and Closeness

Coping With Geographic Distance Through Technology

Throughout the 20th century, U.S. families increasingly popularized nuclear family living, apart from extended family living. People turned to industrial jobs outside the family farm,

sought advanced educations in distant locations away from family, and gained the economic means to support separate living arrangements. As families have become more geographically dispersed, technological advances such as phones, airplane travel, and computer-assisted communication (e.g., e-mail, Facebook) allow family members to maintain active ties more so than in the past (Schmeeckle & Sprecher, 2004).

Access to these technological tools for staying in touch with extended family depends on economic resources and time. Although many believe that people who experience low socioeconomic conditions increase contact with extended family networks to alleviate the conditions of poverty, Roschelle (1997) cautions that this assumption is too simple. For people who are geographically close to their extended family, turning to extended family for practical assistance may be a realistic option. But for people who are geographically distant from extended family, turning to extended family requires money. This may be one reason why Roschelle argues that as socioeconomic conditions increase, participation in social support networks increase, especially if the supportive network is a geographically distant family. Even though more education and greater economic resources can lure people away from their extended family to pursue career opportunities, these privileges can increase contact with extended family, to the extent that one has the economic means for travel, computers, and phones (Johnson, 2000).

Yet economic means do not ensure that extended family members stay in touch. People have to take the time to use technology. Tee, Bernheim Brush, and Inkpen (2009) discovered through interviews that parents and grandparents say they wish they could communicate more through technological avenues such as phone and e-mail, but busy lives seem to prevent it. “Any new technology that connects family members runs the risk of becoming just one more thing for a person to do or feel guilty about not doing,” so in this way technology is not a magic ticket to smooth and frequent extended family connections (Tee et al., 2009, p. 137). Grandparents who use e-mail to stay in contact with grandchildren say they are more satisfied with e-mail as a means of communication when they and their grandchild mutually initiate contact (Holladay & Seipke, 2007). Mutually initiated e-mail may be a sign of a relationship that both grandparent and grandchild are interested in maintaining.

Trends Toward Multigenerational Living

Just as the opportunities of modern life can create more geographic distance among family members, modern economic challenges and cultural or immigration influences may serve to keep extended families under the same roof. In chapter 1, we reported that multigenerational living is sharply on the rise in the U.S.: the number of parents living in the homes of their adult children increased by 67% from 2000 – 2007 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Multigenerational households were at a low in 1980 (only 10% of family units as multigenerational), but began a gradual increase in the 1990s. The recent increase in multigenerational living may be related to a tough economy, where home prices and job declines discourage separate homes. Besides the economy, Glick, Bean, and Van Hook (1997) traced the increases in multigenerational living during the 1990s to waves of immigration among Mexican, Guatemalan, and Salvadoran families. Thus, it seems the trend toward separate living arrangements that began over a century ago is now being calibrated by economic and cultural changes.

Gender

Women as Kinkeepers

Scholars have produced consistent evidence to suggest that women are more involved in maintaining family ties than men, and older women do more of the work to maintain family ties than younger women (Adams, 1999; Ellingson & Sotirin, 2006). Schmeeckle and

Sprecher (2004) emphasize that men are also involved in maintaining family ties, just not to the same degree as women in most families. Compared to men, women are socialized to be “kinkeepers.” Obligation goes hand in hand with the kinkeeper role. Women indeed report more obligation to care for and assist kin (Stein, 1992). But even though women feel more obligation, Stein found that men are more likely to experience psychological distress (e.g., depression, neuroticism) in conjunction with their feelings of obligation. Why is it that feelings of obligation are not associated with psychological distress in women to the degree they are in men? This is especially puzzling given women experience *more* feelings of obligation than men. Stein argues that when people have the opportunity to repay obligations, they feel less distress because they can actively take personal control over ridding themselves of obligatory feelings. Norms and expectations for women to assist kin, host family gatherings, and initiate contact may be an outlet for repaying obligations and reducing psychological distress, and this outlet is not as normative for men.

The Matrifocal Tilt

Researchers who study grandparent–grandchild relationships have long noted a *matrifocal tilt* among families in the U.S. That is, extended family ties on the maternal side of families tend to be stronger. For example, compared to men, adult women, in general, have more contact with their parents and report more closeness, though the differences are not extraordinary (Pashos & McBurney, 2008). There seems to be evidence that the grandparent–grandchild relationship is positively correlated with the adult child’s relationship with parents and kin (Pashos & McBurney, 2008). Women who are charged with a majority of childrearing duties may turn to their own extended family to help. When the mother’s extended family helps out with childrearing, this may in turn strengthen an appreciative mother’s own relationship with extended family.

Aunts

Aunts, and especially maternal aunts, can play important roles for nieces and nephews. According to nieces and nephews, aunts’ most typical roles include: teacher, role model, confidante, savvy peer, and second mother (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2006). Even though the boundaries around first-tier families may keep aunts and nieces/nephews from developing the kind of closeness of a parent–child bond, aunts can enjoy the benefits of these boundaries. These benefits include less responsibility and discipline, more freedom to indulge children, less rebellion from nieces/nephews than parents experience, and the freedom to focus more exclusively on interactions that strengthen the relationship (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2006; Langer & Ribarich, 2007). For those aunts who are involved in significant caregiving, the boundaries of first-tier and extended family are blurred. When children have more than one maternal aunt, the younger maternal aunt tends to be more involved in care (Pashos & McBurney, 2008). It may be that younger aunts have more time to invest, especially if they are unmarried or do not have their own children (Langer & Ribarich, 2007; Pashos & McBurney, 2008).

GRANDPARENT–GRANDCHILD RELATIONSHIPS

Compared to marital communication or parent–child communication, grandparent–grandchild (GP–GC) communication has received less research attention from family scientists, especially those in the communication discipline (Soliz, Lin, Anderson, & Harwood, 2006; Harwood, 2000a). Attention appears to be growing, however, inspired perhaps from Szinovacz’s (1998) edited *Handbook on Grandparenthood*, Bengtson and Robertson’s (1985) *Grandparenthood*, well-developed research programs on intergenerational communication (e.g., Anderson,

Harwood, & Hummert, 2005; Williams & Nussbaum, 2001), and the simple fact that lifespan increases have allowed grandparents to be an active factor in the lives of grandchildren more than any other time in history. Another reason for interest in GP–GC relationships is because both grandparents and grandchildren appear to benefit from close, positive relationships. Many grandparents feel pride in their grandchildren (Harwood & Lin, 2000), enjoy imparting stories, values, and spending time with grandchildren (Harwood, 2004), and feel that grandchildren “keep them young” (Harwood, McKee, & Lin, 2000). Grandchildren benefit from the social support provided by their grandparents (Lin, Harwood, & Bonnesen, 2002), as well as the guidance and connection to family history (Harwood, 2004).

In this chapter, our review focuses on two primary areas: the roles of grandparents and the intergenerational communication in GP–GC relationships. Like most family roles, the role of grandparent can be played in vastly different ways depending on the family. Researchers interested in the ways that grandparent roles vary study factors such as the timing of when one becomes a grandparent, whether the grandparent is a primary caregiver, how divorce affects grandparent roles, and cultural underpinnings to the grandparent role. Acknowledging that not all grandparents are the same, researchers have developed typologies of grandparent styles. In the second section, we shift the focus slightly to review research on the intergenerational communication of grandparents and grandchildren. To begin, we review several prominent theories that describe how attitudes about older adults impact GP–GC communication and vice versa. In addition, we explore GP–GC communication patterns and topics, as well as how grandparents and grandchildren negotiate closeness and relationship maintenance through communication.

The Role of Grandparent

Prevalence and Timing

Over the course of the last hundred years, increasing life expectancies mean people are more likely to have grandparents living when they are born. Uhlenberg and Kirby’s (1998) work on demographic trends in grandparenthood projected that in 2000, two-thirds of all children began their lives with a complete set of grandparents. In 1900, less than one-fourth of newborns began their lives with all grandparents alive. Juxtaposed to the fact that people have more living grandparents, children today have fewer siblings and cousins than a century ago because of current trends toward smaller first-tier families.

Before concluding that grandparenthood is unconditionally on the rise, it is important to consider other demographic trends that in small ways offset the likelihood that people will know their grandparents or be a grandparent. Even though people are living longer, an increasing number of people will never have a grandchild. Ulenberg and Kirby calculated that rates of grandchildlessness will reach 25% for those entering old age after 2020. In comparison, of women aged 60–64 in 1900, only 16.4% were grandchildless. In addition, women are delaying childbirth, which counters grandparents’ chances of getting to know their grandchildren before grandparents die. Matthews and Hamilton (2002) report that the mean age of U.S. mothers for a first birth was 21.4 in 1970 and 24.9 in 2000. Most striking, from 1990–2001, the number of women who gave birth increased by 14% for women 30–34, by 28% for women 35–39, and by 47% for women 40–44. Equally notable, the number of teenage pregnancies has decreased to historically low levels (Ventura, Hamilton, & Sutton, 2003).

People have expectations regarding the “model age” for becoming a grandparent. Hirshorn (1998) introduced the idea of “*on-time*” versus “*off-time*” grandparenthood. In off-time grandparenthood, people experience the role of grandparenthood earlier or later than they expected. Experiencing the role off-time can leave grandparents feeling deviant, isolated, or lacking in social support (Hirshorn, 1998). In a moment, we discuss grandparents who become primary caretakers of their grandchildren, sometimes because of an off-time birth such as a

teenage pregnancy. In the other direction, some people experience anxiety due to the fact that they are not grandparents by the time they expected to be.

Grandparent Types

In 1964, Neugarten and Weinstein developed one of the first typologies of grandparenting styles. Their typology included five styles. The (1) *formal style* describes grandparents who maintain a clear line between parents and grandparents. They might occasionally babysit, provide special gifts, or minor services, but they are sure not to offer advice on childrearing to parents. The (2) *fun-seeker style* involves grandparents who have the view that the GP–GC relationship should be one of pleasure and leisure. They look to have fun with their grandchildren rather than establish lines of authority. Sometimes the fun involves indulging in special activities and treats. In the (3) *surrogate parent style*, the grandparent, usually the grandmother, takes on a parenting role and may even substitute for the children’s mother. The surrogate parent role is called upon when the mother and father cannot take care of the children because of employment or other reasons. Grandfathers commonly enact the (4) *reservoir of family wisdom* style. Here, the grandparent represents an authoritative figure with traditional power. This powerful figure hands down resources, lessons, and skills. Finally, the (5) *distant figure* style depicts grandparents who have little or no contact with their grandchildren. When they do have contact it usually involves a fleeting appearance at a family ritual or holiday.

Cherlin and Furstenberg (1985, 1986) developed another popular classification of grandparenting styles. This classification was later replicated and extended by Mueller, Wilhelm, and Elder (2002). The classification also involves five grandparenting styles, described in Table 9.1.

Mueller et al. (2002) further note that *influential* and *supportive* grandparents are usually embedded within a highly cohesive family system. Compared to other types of grandparents, these grandparents also tend to be more educated, have fewer grandchildren, live closer to their grandchildren, and are sometimes involved in farming. *Passive* and *detached* grandparents tend to live farther away, be on the paternal side, have a large number of grandchildren, lack encouragement from the parent generation, and not be involved in farming. *Authority-oriented* grandparents tend to be younger, employed full-time, encouraged by the parents to play an authority role, and more likely to be on the maternal side.

Grandparents as Primary Caretakers

Some people imagine that grandparenthood will be a time of great joy, filled with relaxed, leisure-based interactions with grandchildren. However, an increasing number of grandparents are playing the role of primary caregiver to their grandchildren. Goodman and Silverstein (2001) report that, in 1997, 6% of children under 18 were living in grandparent-headed households. By ethnicity, in 1997 grandparent-headed households were the norm for 13% of African American children, 5.7% of Hispanic children, and 3.9% of non-Hispanic White children. It is somewhat difficult to interpret these numbers because some grandparent-headed households include three-generations, where parents are present but grandparents head the house. More recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2008b) teases out those households where grandparents are present versus those where grandparents are primary caregivers. In 2004, around 6.5 million (9%) of children lived with a grandparent present, and 1.6 million of these children had no parent present—only a grandparent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008b).

Grandparents who have sole responsibility for their grandchildren often take on this role in response to disruptive family events that preclude parents from taking primary responsibility for their children. Such events may include the parents’ incarceration, addiction, death, mental illness, teen pregnancy, or child abuse (Gladstone, Brown, & Fitzgerald, 2009; Minkler & Roe, 1993). A troubling reality for some grandparents is that they are not always clear about whether

Table 9.1 Typology of grandparenting styles

| | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| 1. <i>Influential:</i> | These grandparents are physically present and highly involved in the grandchildren's lives on a weekly and sometimes daily basis. They feel they have an intimate relationship with their grandchildren and act as a confidant for their grandchild. They sometimes advise their grandchildren and talk about their grandchild's future. They offer instrumental help in the form of financial assistance, helping the grandchild find a job, etc. Authority and discipline are also part of the grandparents' role. |
| 2. <i>Supportive:</i> | Unlike influential grandparents, supportive grandparents do not enter into a role of authority and discipline with their grandchildren. They see their grandchildren very often, though perhaps not as frequently as the influential grandparents. They encourage their grand child's talents and attend their grandchild's activities. They are similar to influential grandparents in many other ways, maintaining intimacy and offering instrumental support. But again, they do not enter the parent-like authority role. |
| 3. <i>Passive:</i> | These grandparents are mildly to moderately involved in their grandchildren's lives. They do not provide instrumental support or engage in authority/discipline. They do not engage in a lot of activities with their grandchild or attend many activities. Still they report being a friend to their grandchild, a confidant on a few limited topics such as parents and the future, and feel that their grandchildren learn some skills from them. Passive grandparents are more likely to live far away from their grandchildren or have a large number of grandchildren to juggle. |
| 4. <i>Authority-oriented:</i> | Like the passive grandparents, authority-oriented grandparents are less involved in social activities with their grandchild. Instead, they see themselves as authority figures and enforce discipline for their grandchildren. They readily provide wisdom and advice. They do provide some instrumental assistance to their grandchildren as well. Younger grandparents are more likely to be authority-oriented. |
| 5. <i>Detached:</i> | These grandparents are the least involved in their grandchildren's lives. They have little interaction, share few activities, do not describe themselves as close to their grandchildren, and do not know their grandchildren well. Occasionally, they provide financial assistance. |

Note. Adapted from Cherlin & Furstenberg (1985, 1986) and Mueller, Wilhelm, & Elder (2002).

they are the *primary* caregivers. Parents might transition into and out of incarceration, episodes of mental illness, or severe substance abuse, making it difficult to know who is in charge. This ambiguity can lead to marginal parenting, triangulation, and/or conflict over parenting. When three generations live together (e.g., grandmother, mother, child) and neither the grandmother nor the mother is clearly in charge, multigenerational family units appear to struggle much more than when parental roles are consistently defined or shared in consistent ways (Goodman, 2007). Children often experience divided loyalties, hurt, anger, disappointment, and guilt in response to mothers and fathers who are inconsistently involved, or not involved at all, in the lives of their children (Crumbley & Little, 1997).

Grandparents who are primary caretakers interact with their children differently than other grandparents. On one hand, they experience the joys of raising a child more directly, as they watch children grow, learn, and participate in activities. However, grandparents also report a long list of stressors associated with the primary caretaker role (Waldrop & Weber, 2001). These stressors include the following: tension and trauma lingering from problems that precluded the parent from providing care, balancing work and care for the grandchild, financial burden, ambiguity over the grandparent's legal authority over the child, poor health, and a lack of social support or coping outlets. In light of these stressors, it is not surprising that undertaking the primary caretaking responsibilities for grandchildren is associated with a higher risk for depression (Soloman & Marx, 2000). Waldrop and Weber describe the most common coping mechanisms used by grandparents who are primary caretakers. In order of those most highly

utilized, the coping mechanisms include: taking action to stabilize the child's situation, talking about feelings, relying on religious faith, working hard rather than dwelling on problems, focusing on the grandchild's needs, reaching out to others (e.g., volunteers, friends), and indulging in bad habits that make them feel better for the moment (e.g., overeating, increased smoking, drinking too much coffee, or staying up late).

As for the children who live with grandparents as primary caretakers, there are challenges to contend with as well as benefits to appreciate. On the side of challenges, children who live with a grandparent and no parent present are twice as likely to be in families below the poverty level, as compared to children living with both a parent and grandparent (Fields, 2003). In addition, when adolescent children reflect on their experience of being raised solely by their grandparents, they describe the challenge of dealing with conflict over generational values and autonomy with regard to topics such as dress, dating, rules, chores, and leisure activities (Dolbin-MacNab & Keiley, 2009). However, recall from chapter 7 (Parent–Child Communication) that adolescents report conflict over generational values and autonomy even when they are raised by their parents.

On the side of strengths, adolescents in Dolbin-MacNab & Keiley's (2009) study overwhelmingly reflected on how much they appreciated their grandparents. They appreciated the close emotional bonds they had with their grandparents and the positive influences of their grandparents in helping them stay out of trouble, succeed in school, or develop a strong value system. They also expressed gratitude and respect for their grandparents. Many adolescents in the study recognized that their grandparents had made their lives better than the alternative (i.e., living with parents or the foster care system) and that their grandparents stepped into unexpected roles for their benefit.

Cultural Influences on the Grandparent Role

Several family scholars argue that cultural considerations influence how the grandparent role is enacted. One such cultural consideration involves immigrant families. Some researchers point to the issue of language compatibility between grandparents and grandchildren in immigrant families. For example, Schmidt and Padilla (1983) discuss the importance of speaking Spanish within Hispanic American families. Some grandchildren speak English and only limited Spanish, whereas their grandparents only speak Spanish. Further, grandchildren who can speak English but choose to speak Spanish with their grandparents may do so as a symbol of respect for cultural heritage and values. Similar issues of language compatibility play a role in many Asian American GP–GC relationships (Kamo, 1998).

Hunter and Taylor (1998) elaborate on the grandmother role in African American families as one of high status with regard to authority. Compared to grandparents in European American families, grandparents in African American families not only accept more responsibilities for caregiving, but they also view themselves as playing a more central role in the family (Hunter & Taylor, 1998). According to Cherlin and Furstenburg (1985), African American grandparents rarely enact a passive grandparenting style. Rather, they usually take on influential or authority-oriented styles, stressing parent-like authority, high involvement, and support. There are a disproportionate number of African American grandmothers serving as primarily caregivers for their children. Some of these inflated numbers are related to higher rates of maternal incarceration and drug abuse among African Americans. Research such as that of Minkler and Roe (1993) highlights the strains experienced by urban African American grandmothers raising children whose parents were consumed by the crack cocaine epidemic. However, African American grandmothers do not always assume primary caretaking responsibilities in response to family stress or deficit (Jimenez, 2002). African American families have a cultural heritage of kinship solidarity that prompts grandmothers to assume involved caretaking responsibilities regardless of the family situation. Whether an African American grandmother becomes involved in the lives of her grandchildren in response to stress, out of

cultural heritage, or for some other reason, the involvement of African American grandmothers in general appears to be strong for most families (Gibson, 2005).

Divorce and Grandparenting

With regard to divorce and grandparents, researchers have focused on two different scenarios. One involves the role that grandparents play when children are experiencing the divorce of their parents. The second involves the impact of grandparental divorce on GP–GC relationships.

When they divorce, parents often mediate the contact between grandchildren and grandparents more so than before. This can make the GP–GC relationship vulnerable (Lussier, Deater-Deckard, Dunn, & Davies, 2002). Young children have little control over seeing their grandparents. As one might expect, contact is lowest between the grandchild and the non-resident-parent grandparents versus the resident-parent grandparents.

Several researchers have discovered that close GP–GC relationships are related to lower levels of emotional and behavioral problems among children who have experienced parental divorce (Henderson, Hayslip, Sanders, & Loudon, 2009; Lussier et al., 2002; Ruiz & Silverstein, 2007). In addition, the impact that grandmothers make on a grandchild's psychological adjustment is stronger among youth from divorced families versus intact families (Henderson et al., 2009). Thus, it seems there are compelling reasons for grandparents to be involved in the lives of their grandchildren who are coping with parental divorce, as long as the GP–GC relationship is a good one. What kind of support do grandchildren perceive that their grandparents offer after their parents' divorce? When young adults in Soliz's (2008) research reflected on support from their grandparents, they described the most common enactments of support as follows: providing emotional support (especially from grandmothers), providing a sense of family stability, keeping peace and positive relations with their child's former spouse, giving "straight talk" to help understand what they can and cannot change (especially from grandfathers), explaining the divorce and what happened, and supporting their adult child (which indirectly supported the grandchild). When these same young adults reflected on how their grandparents acted as barriers to support, they cited grandparents who were absent, critical, incapacitated, or silent.

There are a few other caveats that could limit the extent and means by which grandparents can positively impact the well-being of a child coping with parental divorce. To begin, Ruiz and Silverstein (2007) found that closeness to a maternal grandmother reduced depressive symptoms more for kids who were already on good terms with their parents versus those who were not. For children who were not on good terms with their parents, involvement of the grandmother may have simply introduced more family problems and conflicts for them. Second, according to Lussier et al. (2002), closeness to a maternal grandmother improved children's adjustment if, after the divorce, the children were living with their mother alone, their mother and a stepfather, or in an arrangement of shared custody between mother and father. For children living with their father and a stepmother, closeness to maternal grandparents was associated with lower adjustment. Among children living with single mothers, closeness with paternal grandparents was also linked with poorer adjustment.

As the baby boom generation ages, many more grandchildren will be involved with grandparents who have divorced previously or even grandparents who divorce after grandchildren are born. Grandparental divorce appears to have negative consequences for the GP–GC relationship (King, 2003). Even though many grandparents who have experienced a divorce still maintain some involvement with their grandchildren, King found that views about the importance of the grandparent role are not as strong in grandparents who have ever divorced. Divorced grandparents have less contact, participate in fewer shared activities, and report weaker bonds with their grandchildren. These negative effects are greater for paternal grandparents and for grandfathers than for grandmothers. King argues that weaker bonds with

grandchildren may also stem from strained adult child–parent relationships or the fact that ever-divorced grandparents tend to live farther away from their grandchildren. On the positive side, King found that if the grandparent–parent relationship is strong prior to the divorce, the GP–GC relationship may be buffered from these negative consequences. In addition, ever-divorced grandparents are more likely to discuss a grandchild’s problems than never-divorced grandparents. King speculates that grandparents who have experienced difficult times or weaker GP–GC bonds may be detached from grandchildren so as to discuss problems more objectively.

With regard to step grandparenting, Cherlin and Furstenburg (1986) found that the age of the step grandchild affects the step GP–GC bond. The older the step grandchild is when the grandparents remarry, the less priority the parents place on encouraging the relationship between the step grandparents and step grandchild. Parents are important mediators in the GP–GC relationship, and step grandparents have new relationships to form with grandchildren as well as those grandchildren’s parents (see Soliz, 2007). Parents may be reluctant to encourage their child’s involvement in a relationship that is also new or challenging to them.

Intergenerational Communication in the GP–GC Relationship

People hold general attitudes about older adults that can influence the way they communicate with their own grandparents. In turn, the relationships that people have with their own grandparents can impact attitudes about older adults in general. Recognizing this bi-directional link, researchers “who study older adults outside the family context (for example, ageist stereotypes and attitudes) and those who examine older adults within the family (for example, grandparent–grandchild relationships)” have drawn together (Soliz & Harwood, 2003, p. 338). There is usually a benefit to studying a topic from multiple perspectives. In this case, the study of GP–GC communication has been grounded in several useful theoretical perspectives, some of which include social identity theory, communication accommodation theory, the communication predicament of aging (CPA) model, and intergroup contact theory.

Theories Underpinning the Study of GP–GC Communication

Communication accommodation theory (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991) begins with grounding in Tajfel and Turner’s (1986) *social identity theory*. The basic premise of social identity theory is that one’s social identity is shaped by membership in various social groups. To achieve a positive social identity, people are drawn to attractive and favorable groups. To maintain the perception that one’s social identity is positive, people compare and evaluate their social ingroups more favorably than outgroups, which are perceived less favorably. Further, when making evaluations of outgroups, people rely on stereotypes, rather than seeing a member of an outgroup as an individual. Expanding on this base, communication accommodation theory argues that language and behaviors offer clues about another person’s social groups and status. Relying on perceptions or evaluations of another’s group membership, people make group-based expectations and accommodations. Accommodations are adjustments or modifications of speech or behavior that people make in an attempt to respond to one another (West & Turner, 2000). Because these accommodations are often group-based and affected by stereotypes, they are not always appropriate for the individual one is attempting to accommodate. This can lead to over accommodation, speech adjustments that are not necessary or overblown, or underaccommodation, where people fail to make adjustments that would help them connect better with a conversational partner.

Although communication accommodation theory has been applied to explain various group-based interactions, the *communication predicament of aging (CPA) model* (Ryan, Giles, Bartolucci, & Henwood, 1986) applies the theory specifically to age-based interactions. The CPA model holds that young people hold many negative stereotypes about older adults and

these stereotypes can influence beliefs about how younger adults should adapt their speech for older adults (Anderson et al., 2005). Triggered by cues that make age apparent, for example facial or vocal signs of aging or health-related impairments, people access negative stereotypes (Soliz & Harwood, 2006). They think, for example, that older adults have diminished physical and mental abilities (Anderson et al., 2005). Based on this stereotype, many young adults overaccommodate their speech in a patronizing way by simplifying speech, increasing volume, widely varying pitch, and as some describe, talking to the older adult in secondary baby talk (Caporalet, 1981; Hummert, Shaner, Garstka, & Henry, 1998). Along with all the negative stereotypes about older adults being impaired or grouchy, Hummert, Garstka, Shaner, and Strahm (1994) found that some young people hold positive stereotypes about older adults, for example, that they are alert, loving, kind, devoted to family and the “perfect grandparent” (see Anderson et al., 2005, for review). Positive stereotypes lead to more “normal” speech from young adults to older adults (Harwood & Williams, 1998).

Harwood and his colleagues have led the way in applying another relevant theory, *intergroup contact theory*, to the study of GP–GC relationships and intergenerational communication (e.g., Harwood, Hewstone, Paolini, & Voci, 2005; Harwood, Raman, & Hewstone, 2006; Soliz, & Harwood, 2006; Tam, Hewstone, Harwood, Voci, & Kenworthy, 2006). Intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954) is based on the idea that a specific interaction or experience with an outgroup member influences general perceptions about all of the members of the whole outgroup. For example, people who have mostly positive relationships with their own grandparents hold more positive stereotypes about older adults in general (Soliz & Harwood, 2003). Those who have more varied grandparent relationships (e.g., some positive relationships and some negative relationships) tend to hold more negative stereotypes of older adults overall (Soliz & Harwood, 2003). In other words, people generalize their specific experiences with grandparents to explain what all older adults are like. The link goes both ways. Experiences with older adults in general also influence specific relationships, such as those with grandparents. When they have more quantity of contact, and to some extent higher quality contact, with older people in general, young adults have better quality relationships with their grandparents and self-disclose to them more (Tam et al., 2006). Further, when parents encourage contact between grandparents and grandchildren, grandchildren experience a more shared family identity (Soliz & Harwood, 2006). Such feelings of shared family identity are important because they deemphasize age and age stereotypes and instead draw attention to the relationship as a special one that is different from other relationships with older adults.

Communication Patterns and Topics in GP–GC Relationships

Researchers have summarized a number of factors (some of which we noted earlier in the chapter as impactful in all extended family relationships) that are influential in GP–GC communication patterns (Elder & Conger, 2000; Mueller et al., 2002). The first is *geographic proximity*. The closer grandparents live to their grandchildren, the more opportunity they have to be involved in their grandchildren’s lives. Opportunity, however, does not always translate to frequent contact or a quality relationship. As we suggested earlier in the chapter, thanks to technology and travel, some grandparents and grandchildren maintain a high quality relationship in spite of distance. A second factor is the *quality of the parents’ relationship with the grandparent*. Mueller et al. note that parents serve as gatekeepers or mediators in the GP–GC relationship. Parents can hinder or facilitate interaction between the two. In some cases grandparents and grandchildren do not have direct exchange and interaction until the grandchild reaches adulthood (Hagestad, 1985). The third factor involves the *matrifocal tilt*. Family ties on the maternal side of families tend to be stronger, particularly family ties between grandparents and grandchildren. Fourth, the *ages of the grandparent and grandchild* can influence contact and involvement. Younger grandparents, who are often healthier, tend to be more

active with their grandchildren. Older grandchildren, in adolescence and young adulthood, commonly detach from family relationships as they develop interests outside the family and no longer need intense care. Fifth, Elder and Conger describe that the *number of grandchildren*, if large, can limit time available to spend with grandchildren and, if small, can maximize time available. Sixth, after *parental divorce*, maternal grandparents especially tend to be more involved in their grandchildren's lives. Finally, numerous other factors such as *religion, family rituals, rural residence*, and *having known one's own grandparents or learned about them through intergenerational history* are all related to GP–GC communication patterns (King & Elder, 1997; Mueller et al., 2002).

Regarding topics of conversation, Lin et al. (2002) found that family and education are the two most commonly discussed topics in GP–GC relationships. Given Harwood and Lin's (2000) finding that grandparents express a great deal of pride in their grandchildren's accomplishments, it would seem natural that educational accomplishments and school activities are a likely topic of conversation. Leisure activities and friendships are other frequently mentioned topics. Although some people believe that grandparents and grandchildren tend to avoid topics related to health and topics related to the age of the grandparents, this may depend on the GP–GC relationship. For example, grandchildren who come from a conversation–orientation family, which is used to discussing both good and bad topics, do not appear to be very troubled when their grandparents express a painful self-disclosure (Fowler & Soliz, 2010). In fact, disclosure and subsequent acceptance of the disclosure may be an indicator of the closeness of their relationship. Finally, grandchildren appear to be more satisfied with their GP–GC relationship when they feel free to “be themselves” as opposed to experiencing an identity gap where they feel they have to present their identity in an untrue way for their grandparents' approval (Kam & Hecht, 2009).

Relational Closeness and Maintenance

Harwood (2000b) discovered several predictors of relational closeness/solidarity and communication satisfaction in the GP–GC relationship. These predictors include: perceptions of kindness, grandparents' perceptions of grandchildren's involvement in and support of the relationship, and grandparents' storytelling behavior. In addition, Harwood (2000a; see also Lin & Harwood, 2003) found that for grandparents and grandchildren alike, perceptions of the other's communication accommodation predicted feelings of solidarity in the relationship. To clarify, neither overaccommodation nor underaccommodation was related to relational solidarity, but rather appropriate accommodations. These included appropriately converging to show affection and respect, sharing personal thoughts and feelings, and demonstrating attentiveness and support. Not surprisingly, Harwood and Lin (2000) also found that grandparents were especially touched when grandchildren took the initiative to call or visit on their own.

Do both grandparents and grandchildren desire close relationships with one another, and are they both active in maintaining the relationship? The *intergenerational stake hypothesis* predicts that compared to grandchildren, grandparents will be more committed to, more interested in investing in, and perceive more closeness in the GP–GC relationship. The intergenerational stake hypothesis is somewhat compatible with socioemotional selectivity theory's prediction that older persons desire to invest in close, meaningful relationships, such as family relationships, whereas younger persons invest more time in peripheral relationships. Indeed, there is empirical support for the intergenerational stake hypothesis. Harwood (2001) confirmed that grandparents view more closeness in the GP–GC relationship than do grandchildren. In addition, grandchildren perceive the GP–GC relationship to be more active than do grandparents. This difference in perception may reflect the different expectations that grandparents and grandchildren have for the relationship (Harwood, 2001). Grandparents may disagree that the relationship is active, especially if they have higher expectations for

involvement than grandchildren hold. Crosnoe and Elder (2002) present a case of the intergenerational stake hypothesis at work in college-aged grandchildren's relationships with grandparents. They found that many grandparents perceive that they have a generational stake in mentoring their grandchildren and being involved in their transition to college. However, most grandchildren do not see the grandparents' involvement as necessary or useful, that is, unless the grandparent also has a similar educational background.

Although grandparents may have more of a stake in maintaining and investing in the GP–GC relationship as compared to grandchildren, most grandchildren report feeling close to their grandparents (Lin & Harwood, 2003). The grandchildren most likely to report feeling close to their grandparents are those who have a lot of contact with or live in close proximity to their grandparents, as well as those who have stronger overall communication skills (Folwell & Grant, 2006). Even college-aged grandchildren say that they are actively involved in relationship maintenance efforts with their grandparents. They report using relationship behaviors such as expressions of positivity and assurances, sharing tasks and networks, and conflict management (Mansson, Myers, & Turner, 2010). However, college students do not rely on maintenance tactics of openness and offering advice to maintain the GP–GC relationship with the same vigor that they approach these same tactics in romantic relationships or friendships (Mansson et al., 2010).

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ADULT CHILDREN AND THEIR PARENTS

Once children become adults and launch from home, the adult child–parent relationship is considered by many an “extended family relationship” (see Schmeckle & Sprecher's definition of extended family earlier in the chapter). Some argue that learned patterns of interaction between parents and children do not change much as children transition to adulthood. For example, Aquilino (1997) explains that overall levels of emotional closeness and mechanisms for dealing with control/conflict appear similar across life stages. Even if some general interaction patterns remain similar as children transition to adulthood, most young adult children experience a newfound independence from their parents, and this prompts changes in communication. Indeed, Mormon and Floyd (2006), who studied adult sons, and Miller-Day (2004), who studied adult daughters, suggest that independence (in the case of sons) and a shift to an egalitarian relationship (in the case of adult daughters and mothers) is a common and welcomed change in the parent–adult child relationship. In fact, mothers and adult daughters who maintain enmeshed, overly close, relationships have less positive patterns of interaction in adulthood (Miller-Day, 2004). It is important to take a close look at parent–adult child relationships, knowing that as children transition to adult roles and as parents age, families face new changes and challenges, and they look back on old challenges differently.

Support and Caregiving

Many middle-aged parents still find themselves providing support to young adult children, even after their children launch from home. In a study with more than 600 parents aged 40–60, parents reported that on average they listened or provided emotional support at least once a week, gave advice once a month, and gave practical or financial assistance nearly every month (Fingerman, Miller, Birditt, & Zarit, 2009). These same parents showed some differential treatment with their provision of support. They gave more to the children they perceived as needy or successful. Parents gave more support, especially financial and practical support, to those children who they felt had more need (e.g., those who were younger, had a health problem or financial problem, or were the victim of a crime). Parents gave more emotional support,

like listening, companionship, and advice, to successful children. As Fingerman et al. (2009) explain, parents may get a lot of satisfaction out of providing nontangible support to successful children, especially if they see those successful children as an extension of themselves.

As adult children move into roles that the parents previously occupied (e.g., the child goes to college, gets married, or begins a similar career), their relationship may improve (Aquilino, 1997). These similar adult experiences give parents and adult children common ground. What about when adult children have their own offspring and enter the role of parent? There is mixed evidence regarding how grandchildren affect the relationship between adult children and their parents. Even though new grandparents often feel excitement and pride, some late life parents report less emotional closeness, more conflict, and more power issues with their adult children who are parents of young children versus those who are not parents (Aquilino, 1997). It might be that adult children and parents who already had strained relationships now have new topics to fight about, (e.g., expectations for babysitting, discipline) and less time to focus on their own relationship. But for those adult children who already had good relationships with their parents, having children may prompt more welcome opportunities to spend time together. New parents need emotional and instrumental support, and many grandparents are happy to provide the support. In the midst of providing welcome support, the adult child–parent relationship can be strengthened. As Lawton, Silverstein, and Bengtson (1994) suggest, greater frequency of contact generally breeds more affection in the adult child–parent relationship, and grandchildren provide a reason for more contact.

As late-life parents age, they and their adult children must deal with tensions between autonomy and paternalism (Hummert, 2007). Questions arise regarding how late life parents can maintain independence and personal control, when and how much adult children should step in to help with chores and care, and how to deal with reversing roles if adult children take on primary or secondary care for dependent parents. When adult children take on significant caregiving, contact dramatically increases, especially if the caretaking involves coresidence. Primary caretaking for an elderly parent can be very stressful for adult children. However, Williams and Nussbaum (2001) argue that contrary to popular opinion, a majority of adult children are not caring for parents with such intensity that it becomes an “overwhelmingly negative burden” for them (p. 158).

Because multigenerational living, and specifically the number of parents living with adult children, is on the rise, one can expect that more adults will find themselves as in-home caretakers for aging parents in the near future. When late life parents move into the home of an adult child, interactions in the whole family system change, even if only the adult child is the primary caregiver. Studying these complexities, Bethea (2002) found that living with an elderly parent was associated with modest decreases in communication satisfaction in the adult child’s marriage, compared to those couples that did not live with a parent. Even though the couples in Bethea’s study had been married over 30 years and presumably had stable patterns of interaction, having an elderly parent present still altered their communication satisfaction. It is important to note, however, that the couples in Bethea’s study that took a parent into their home had higher communication satisfaction to begin than the couples that did not take in an elderly parent. Thus one should put these decreases in satisfaction in perspective.

Conflict and Hurtful Behavior

Almost all adult children and their parents experience conflict and relationship tensions at some point. Dealing with these conflicts constructively (i.e., working to understand each other and find a solution) leads to better relationship quality than using destructive tactics (i.e., yelling, name calling, arguing) or avoidance (i.e., not talking to each other, avoiding topics) (Birditt, Rott, & Fingerman, 2009). At first glance the findings of the Birditt et al. study seem simplistic, but it is important to look deeper. Of course constructive tactics would seem to lead to better relationship functioning in most close relationships. However, the relationship

between adult children and parents is an *extended* family relationship. Birditt et al. appeared especially interested in the findings regarding avoidance tactics, because one might entertain whether simply avoiding a topic or not talking would work best in an extended family relationship. Sometimes avoidance is even a useful tactic in close relationships when used to protect a relationship, another person, or one's self (see Caughlin & Affi, 2004). Birditt et al. (2009), in part, tested an old adage that laypersons often apply to extended family relationships: "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all" (p. 775). At least in the typical situations that the adult children and parents were reporting on in the Birditt et al. study, constructive strategies worked best, and they were also the strategies used most frequently. The general theme—that the relationships of adult children and their parents benefit from constructive strategies and a conversation orientation, as opposed to a conformity orientation or avoidance—is prevalent in other research as well (e.g., Shearman & Dumlao, 2008).

Adult children have years of accumulated experiences with their parents, and sometimes adult children reflect on hurtful experiences from the past with parents. Does time heal any of these wounds? There is some evidence that time does facilitate healing. In situations where children transition to forgiveness after a parent's betrayal or transgression, forgiveness does not occur as a discrete event in time. It can take years. It is not until children enter more advanced stages of forgiveness, sometimes not until adulthood, that commitment, relational satisfaction, and in some cases trust with their parent increase again (Brann, Rittenour, & Myers, 2007). In describing Gordon and Baucom's (1998) stages of forgiveness, Brann et al. illustrate why relationship quality does not improve much until individuals are able to put an event in context and move on. Forgiveness is a process that includes (1) *impact*, (2) *definition*, and (3) *moving on* stages. In the impact stage, people question why the betrayal occurred, avoid the betrayer, and experience feelings of hurt, for example, anger, denial, distress. In the definition stage, individuals validate their emotions, try to put the event in context, and attempt to regain control by seeking an apology or revenge. In the moving on stage, the forgiver reframes the situation to recognize the vulnerabilities and flaws of the betrayer. The forgiver expresses a desire to continue the relationship, but in a realistic, not idealistic, way. The forgiver possibly even feels compassion for the betrayer, or at least finds ways to manage negative flashbacks or avoid vengeful behavior. Some past situations, however, are so painful that forgiveness is not likely.

By the time they are grown, adult children become very sophisticated at developing rules for managing information about hurtful family events or betrayals. Studying how adult children handle information about their parent's infidelity, Thorson (2009) learned that adults develop both external and internal protection rules. For example, adults reported that they were motivated to protect themselves, their own children, and the family from external scrutiny (i.e., people outside the family). Further, in deciding whether to discuss their parent's infidelity with another family member internally (i.e., give access to private information to members in the family), adults were influenced by the family members' sex and age, the context and the physical environment (e.g., if other people were around), and their ability to use code terms (e.g., more benign word descriptions as opposed to "cheating" or "infidelity").

RELATIONSHIPS WITH IN-LAWS

Finally, what do we know about the communication in in-law relationships? Popular jokes about in-law relationships stereotype them as negative and distant. In particular, relationships between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are commonly characterized as negative, competitive, and filled with resentment over having to share the son/husband (Lopata, 1999). The in-law relationship is very complex. Serewicz (2006) describes relationships with parents-in-law as nonvoluntary and triadic. Are the stereotypes of in-law relationships played out in real life? And what are the effects of these complex relationships?

When a person marries into a family, he or she often feels intense scrutiny. The larger family is focused on getting to know one person, while the newly married spouse must get to know multiple in-laws (Serewicz, 2008). It takes time to become socialized into a family, and as Serewicz explains, “the development of each individual relationship may lag” (2008, p. 286). In new marriages, partners often feel a tension between inclusion and seclusion, particularly regarding how they balance their time (Prentice, 2009). The partners know that they need to make time for the new spouse to get to know the family (e.g., by attending family events), but at the same time, they wish to establish their own identity as a couple and spend time alone. When introducing a future spouse to the extended family, people often craft situations where the interactions will be mediated (Prentice, 2009). In other words, both partners will be together during the interaction, rather than leaving a new spouse alone with family members. This provides the opportunity to step in, mediate, explain, and guide topics in ways that ensure that the new spouse will be viewed favorably. This tactic also presents a joint front and emphasizes the identity and priorities of the new couple. The downside of mediated communication, according to Prentice (2009), is that it is not until the new spouse begins to develop direct relationships with family members that he or she becomes fully socialized into the family. Direct relationships with siblings-in-law are often some of the first to form, especially when siblings-in-law share interests and attitudes with the new family member (Prentice, 2009).

One reason why it is important for a new spouse to become socialized into a family is because he or she becomes part of the ingroup, or part of the “inner circle,” as depicted in the comedy *Meet the Fockers*. When they reflected on their relationships, both daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law in Turner, Young, and Black’s (2006) research cited ambivalence about their place in the family as one of the most critical struggles. These tensions about ingroup and outgroup identity give intergroup researchers ripe topics to study. Rittenour and Soliz (2009) found a positive relationship between shared family identity and relational satisfaction in mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships. When people feel part of the shared family identity, not only do they relish being a part of the group, they express behavioral intentions that would benefit the group. For example, the daughters-in-law in the Rittenour and Soliz study who had a greater shared sense of family identity had more intentions of joining in family caregiving, maintaining the in-law relationship after the death or divorce of a spouse, and encouraging GP–GC contact. Rittenour and Soliz also discovered that mothers-in-law can make specific communication accommodations that are perceived positively by daughters-in-law. These include mothers-in-law communicating support, appropriately self-disclosing, expressing family inclusion of the daughter-in-law, and showing respect for differing values. Alternatives like non accommodation or interference are perceived negatively. In this relatively new area of research on in-law communication, Rittenour and Soliz’s research is important because it points to specific communication behaviors and influences that can lead to positive in-law relationships.

Another important theme in the research on communication with in-laws is that the quality of the in-law relationship is positively related to the quality of the adult child’s marriage, even after years of marriage (Bryant, Conger, & Meehan, 2001; Serewicz, 2004). It is difficult to tell the direction of this relationship, whether marital quality affects the quality of relationship with in-laws, vice versa, or likely some of both (see Serewicz, 2006). Conflict appears to be the active factor, such that when a spouse is involved in conflict with the in-laws, the conflict spills over to the marriage, and vice versa. Similarly, the quality of the relationship that the adult son/daughter has with his/her parents seems to have parallel influences on the in-law relationship (Rittenour & Soliz, 2009). For instance, a son who has a strained relationship with his own parents probably predisposes his wife to think negatively about her in-laws.

In post-divorce situations, a majority of people who have children maintain relationships with their former in-laws. To be specific, in Frisby and Sidelinger’s research (2009), nearly 80% of the post-divorce parents with children maintained relationships with former in-laws, and

most frequently with the former mother-in-law or former sister-in-law. The most common method of relationship maintenance was “shared tasks,” prompting Frisby and Sidelingers to suggest that maintaining the relationship may be driven mostly by practical benefits (e.g., babysitting).

CONCLUSION

For some people extended family relationships are a source of great support and close contact. Others express ambivalent or even negative feelings about extended family relationships and keep contact at a minimum. People’s perceptions of and interactions in extended families are influenced by several sociocultural and contextual factors. For example, people who are older, or sense they have less time left in life, often place greater stake in intergenerational family relationships and are motivated to devote time to extended family relationships, especially if they find them emotionally meaningful. In addition, many scholars believe that extended family ties are stronger, or at least more important, in ethnic minority families. While this may be true in some cases, some notable research in the last decade cautions that family scholars have sometimes exaggerated the idea that present-day minority families participate more actively with extended family out of values of familism. In fact, when socioeconomic status is held equal, differences in extended family ties often disappear. In cases where extended family is separated by distance, higher socioeconomic status promotes access to travel and technology for staying in touch. As for gender, women still appear to be more actively involved in maintaining family ties, leading to a matrifocal tilt, such that families often maintain more contact with the wife’s side of the family as compared to the husband’s.

Grandparents, adult children, and in-laws are three types of extended family relationships most studied by family researchers. With regard to grandparents, most say they feel great pride in their grandchildren. However, there are numerous ways grandparents play out their role and communicate with grandchildren. Some grandparents literally are the primary caretakers of their grandchildren. In another extreme, some grandparents enact a detached style with little or no contact with their grandchildren. Most GP–GC relationships fall somewhere between, with moderate contact that revolves around topics like family and education. The GP–GC relationship is one of the primary relationships that children and young adults have with older people. Interactions with grandparents affect how young adults communicate with other older adults outside the family.

The adult child–parent relationship is another extended family relationship that researchers are beginning to better understand. It is a relationship that can be filled with support and affection, often acted out in new egalitarian ways. However, many adult children still deal with the carryover of conflicts and parental transgressions from the past as well as new challenges brought on by life stage changes. Eventually, most adult children are at least moderately involved in caregiving to the parents who once cared for them.

Finally, a majority of adult children introduce a partner or spouse to their parents and family. This begins the in-law relationship—a non-voluntary, triadic relationship. The way adult sons and daughters relate to their own parents lays the path for how their spouse will interact with his or her in-laws. Further, the quality of the in-law relationship is positively related to the quality of the marital relationship. Even though a lot of people experience strained or ambivalent feelings about their in-laws, it does not have to be this way, especially if families can help the in-law feel a part of the shared family identity. In the end, if we truly want to understand the family system as a whole, extended family relationships deserve careful study. They are part of what makes family life a complex web of relationships.

Part III

**Communication during
Family Stress**

10 Models of Family Stress and Coping

Stress is an inevitable part of family life. Although there are few certainties in the modern family, it is safe to assume that all families will experience stress and that coping with stressors will be an ongoing activity in all families. Why is stress such a ubiquitous part of family life? In some cases, families generate stressors of their own through problematic interactions among themselves (Pearlin & Skaff, 1998). Most parents who have raised an adolescent child, and most people who can remember their family interactions during adolescence, have experienced such stressors. In other cases family members encounter problems in their roles outside of the family boundary (e.g., student, employee, friend) that can adversely impact relationships and activities within the family (Pearlin & Skaff, 1998). This happens for example when a parent gets laid off at work. For reasons such as these, it has been argued that “All stressors either begin or end up in the family” (Olson, 1997, p. 261).

In this chapter we will attempt to answer a number of fundamental questions about the role and impact of stress on family relationships. For example, what are the different types of stressors that families must deal with? Do all stressful events have a negative impact on the family? Through examining various models of family stress we attempt to explain the process by which families respond to stress. Questions about the role of communication in addressing and managing stressors are taken up as well. There are also a number of important questions about the family’s response to stress. How do families cope with stressors? Exactly how does social support from the family help to deal with stressful experiences and situations? The answers to these questions reveal complex and intriguing associations between the family and the stressors that they face. Further, they show that reacting and responding to stress is a complex family process that is influenced by a variety of different interacting variables (Malia, 2006).

When studying the effects of stress on the family, it is important to distinguish stress from stressors. Olson, Lavee, and McCubbin (1988) define *family stressors* as “discrete life events or transitions that have an impact upon the family unit and produce, or have the potential to produce, change in the family social system” (p. 19). On the other hand, *family stress* is the response of the family to the stressor; it involves the tensions that family members experience as a result of the stressor (McCubbin et al., 1980). When do stressors produce stress? According to family systems theorists (see chapter 2) families develop a requisite variety of rules of transformation (Burr & Klein, 1994). This means that families usually have enough rules for how to handle different situations that they are able to transform inputs (e.g., stressors) into outputs in such a way that their basic needs, functions, and goals can be sustained. The family experiences stress when they do not have the requisite variety of rules to meet the challenges of certain stressors. In other words, they do not have the means to handle the change that is necessitated by the stressor while still fulfilling their basic goals and functions.

People often think of family stressors and stress in negative terms. However, it is important to keep in mind that stress can stimulate growth and important transitions for families. Successfully managing stress can fundamentally alter family relationships and interactions,

sometimes in a very positive way. At the same time, stress can sometimes permanently damage, if not destroy, family relationships. Often the key to explaining the consequences of stressors on the family can be found in a careful examination of their communication behaviors. Stress can alter family communication patterns, but family communication patterns can equally alter the family's experience and reaction to a stressor.

TYPES OF FAMILY STRESSORS

There are an almost infinite number of events or situations that families might find stressful. One useful way to think about family stressors is to consider those that are normative or predictable versus those that are nonnormative or unpredictable (Cowan, 1991). *Normative family stressors* involve those changes or progressions in family life that occur for most families, usually coming with the passage of time. These involve, for example, marriage, birth of the first child, or death of an elderly family member. Normative stressors are viewed as ubiquitous in that they occur in most families, and expectable because they can easily be anticipated (McCubbin et al., 1980). *Nonnormative family stressors*, on the other hand, are difficult to foresee because they happen somewhat at random, and do not occur in every family. These include, for example, the serious illness of a child, involuntary separations from the family, and divorce. Because of the random nature of nonnormative stressors, they are often experienced as more traumatic for family members. At the same time, the ability to see normative stressors impending on the horizon does not necessarily lessen their impact on the family environment.

It is important to understand that the distinction between normative and nonnormative family stressors is imperfect. As we will argue in chapter 11, the “normative” family stressors that accompany progression through the family life cycle may not really be normative in modern society. Untimely death, divorce, and childlessness mean that many families never experience some of the stressors that are commonly considered to be normative. Similarly, those stressors that are characterized as “nonnormative” may not be as unpredictable as once thought. At least some “unpredictable” family stressors such as marital distress and divorce are clearly foreshadowed in couple's communication behaviors.

Both normative and nonnormative family stressors contribute to what family systems theorists refer to as *morphogenesis* (Olson, Sprenkle, & Russell, 1979). That is the tendency of a family to develop and change over time. The inevitability of normative family stressors implies that there will always be morphogenetic forces impinging on all families. During periods of relative calm, families also experience *morphostasis*, which is the tendency to remain at a steady state, or follow the status quo. The experience of both normative and nonnormative stressors typically disrupts morphostatic tendencies and at least temporarily engages morphogenetic tendencies of the family.

Another useful way of understanding and classifying family stressors was developed by Adams (1975), who argued that there are two distinct dimensions to family stressors. The first has to do with how *temporary vs. permanent* the family stressor is. Some stressors such as raising an adolescent child are inherently temporary and, by necessity, will eventually pass. Other stressors, such as the death of a family member, are permanent. These are stressors that the family will bear over the long run. Keep in mind that temporary and permanent really represent end points on a continuum. There are of course many stressors, such as long-term illness, that fall somewhere in between these two extremes. The second conceptual dimension proposed by Adams (1975) concerns the *voluntary vs. involuntary* nature of family stressors. As strange as it may sound at first, family members sometimes voluntarily enter into situations that can be very stressful. For example, a married couple may undergo a period of separation or seek a divorce on their own volition. Other stressors, such as infertility or raising a troubled child, are more involuntary in nature. Like the temporary–permanent dimension, voluntary and

involuntary are best viewed as endpoints on a continuum. Some stressors, like early retirement or optional layoff from work, might be viewed as a situation that is a response to both voluntary and involuntary forces. It may be tempting to conclude that voluntary stressors are easier to cope with than those that are involuntary because people often have some control over them. However, voluntary stressors carry with them more personal responsibility and blame that can create considerable mental anguish for family members.

A more recent theory of family stress conceptualizes stress as occurring at one of three different levels of abstraction (Burr & Klein, 1994). Burr and Klein based their conceptualization of different levels of stress on group theory and the theory of logical types (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). Group theory explains how change can occur within a system that as a whole stays constant. The theory of logical types explains how members experience a metamorphosis whereby they move from one logical level to a higher one. Combining elements of these theories, Burr and Klein (1994) proposed a developmental theory of family stress based on different logical levels of stress and with the assumption that families will first try to adjust very specific concrete processes in order to deal with stress before resorting to more fundamental and abstract changes to the family system.

Level I stress causes the family to cope by changing its role expectations or rules. If changes in these role expectations and/or rules are effective at handling the stressor, the family is assumed to enter into a period of recovery as they gain mastery over the stressor. Burr and Klein (1994) suggest that for many families, the birth of a child represents a level I stressor. In most families, husbands and wives have to assume a new role (i.e., father and mother) and certain rules may need to be enacted to address the stressor (e.g., someone needs to feed the child when s/he wakes up in the morning). For most families, such changes are sufficient for effectively coping with the stressor. When level I processes are unsuccessful, the family is in a more difficult situation, characterized as level II stress.

When families encounter *level II stress*, rearranging rules or making simple changes in roles is not sufficient to allow the family to effectively deal with the stressor. Rather, the family must make more fundamental changes, usually in their approach to relating to each other. For example, when a family attempts to handle the stress of raising an adolescent child, they may develop new rules such as a curfew, and make role adjustments such as having the child assume responsibility for some household chores. If this approach is not effective, the family may need to rethink its approach to discipline, responsibility, and the way that they relate to the child. Instead of just assuming that the parents' rules and intentions will automatically be followed, they may need to reconsider how they relate to the child, perhaps by now creating adverse consequences when rules and obligations are not followed. This may change the fundamental nature of the parent-child relationship from caretaker and provider to authority figure and enforcer. When such level II processes are ineffective, the family is in an even more difficult situation, characterized as level III stress.

The experience of *level III stress* causes the family to question its most basic assumptions, and the very fabric of the family is in trouble (Burr & Klein, 1994). The family's most basic orientation and philosophy of life must be examined, and often changed or discarded. Returning to our example of raising the adolescent child, assume that the child is involved in criminal activity, charged with assault, and sentenced to a juvenile detention facility. In this case, the parents may feel overwhelmed and defeated, despite their best efforts at raising the child. They may have to psychologically relinquish at least part of their relationship with, and emotional connection to, their child in order to cope with the severe stressor that they are experiencing. In this case, the very nature of what it means to be a family and a parent is called into question, reexamined, and altered in response to the stressor. That idea that parents are ultimately responsible for the actions of their children may have to be abandoned. Burr and Klein note that in level III stress families often have to deal with fundamental questions of whether people are good or bad, their spiritual beliefs, and how much emotional distance between family members is necessary and desirable.

MODELS OF FAMILY STRESS

The ABC-X Model

Perhaps the premier model of family stress was developed and described by Hill (1949) as part of his now-classic research on the stress of separation and reunion following World War II. During World War II many men were enlisted into the military and shipped overseas as part of their military service, often leaving their wives and children behind to face an uncertain future. During the war, many women entered the work force for the first time and earned their own salaries. When the war ended and soldiers came home many families had yet another set of adjustments to make. Adopting a systems perspective, Hill realized that the stress experienced by the family was not just the result of a particular event such as the husband's departure from the home due to active military duty. Rather, there were a number of systemic variables that seemed to influence which families experienced high degrees of stress and which managed without as much difficulty.

The ABC-X model gets its name from four interrelated factors that are theorized to describe the experience of family stress. The A factor represents the *event or situation* that the family encounters. This interacts with the B factor, the family's *resources*. The event or situation also interacts with the C factor, the family's *perception* of the event. Collectively the A, B, and C factors produce the *stress or crisis* reaction, which is the X factor. Hill's ABC-X model is depicted in Figure 10.1.

Stressful Events or Situations (A)

In the family context, a stressful event has been described as “an occurrence that provokes a variable amount of change in the family system” (McKenry & Price, 2000, p. 6). Notice how the focus of McKenry and Price's definition of the stressful event is focused on *change*. The underlying assumption is that anything that alters the status quo has the potential to produce stress. Most families develop routines that allow for smooth functioning without having to constantly renegotiate roles, argue over rules, and so forth. When stressful events occur, these routines are upset. Roles that used to be functional for the family are now lost or seriously altered. Rules that used to ensure family harmony and well-being may now have to be adjusted or broken once the event or situation is encountered. McKenry and Price (2000) also note that not all “stressful” events or situations are negative. Even positive events can produce stress in the family. The inheritance of a large sum of money from a distant relative or a job promotion can each be associated with stress. Remarkably, the stress associated with these seemingly

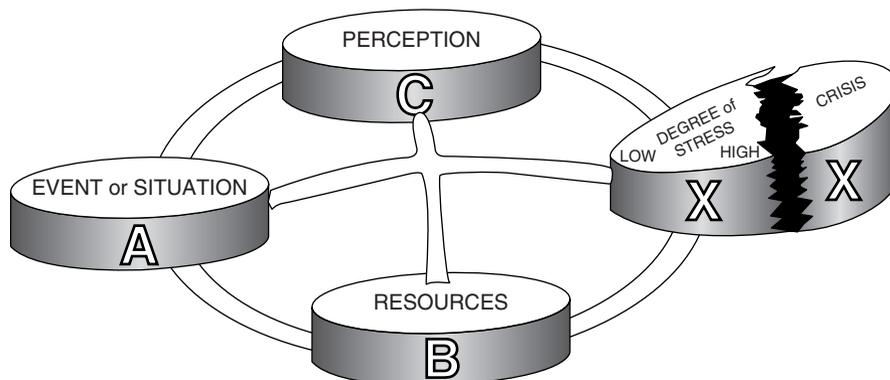


Figure 10.1 Hill's (1949) ABC-X model of family stress.

positive events or situations can sometimes be as disruptive to family functioning as the stress from what are ordinarily viewed as negative events, such as the death of a family member or the loss of a family member's job. Later in this chapter we discuss one common classification scheme for stressful family events based on their predictability or unpredictability.

Family Resources (B)

Resources are traits, abilities, and qualities of individual family members, the family system, and the greater community in which the family is embedded that can be used to address the demands imposed by the event or situation (McCubbin & Patterson, 1985). Family systems theorists generally feel that resources reside in individuals, the collective family unit, and the societal ecosystem in which the family is a part. Family resources can mitigate the ill effects of many situations. For example, if a family member is laid off at work but other family members have good jobs and incomes, these resources can lessen the potentially negative impact of the situation on the family. Therefore, family scientists say that resources may act as a *buffer* against the potentially negative consequences of stressful events. On the other hand, some families may lack resources to protect against the negative effects of certain events. Consider for example a rural farm family that is isolated and has few close friends or relatives. Even a fairly modest event such as the brief hospitalization of one of the parents has the potential to create substantial turmoil for the family and the care of their farm. In this way, family scientists suggest that the lack of resources can create a *vulnerability* to stress when certain events or situations are encountered.

Family Perception (C)

The family's perception is their appraisal, assessment, or definition of the event or situation. How people appraise life events and situations is strongly tied to how stressed they are in response to those situations (Lazarus & Launier, 1978). There is remarkable variation in how different families appraise the same event. For instance, in some families the departure of a young adult child might be a time of intense sadness. Parents may fear the loss of the child's companionship, worry about how the child will make it on his or her own, and lament missed opportunities for interaction with the child that may never be recaptured. However, other families may view this as a celebration, fueled by pride in the child's successful transition to adulthood and independence, or by a "good riddance" attitude. The great American songwriter John Mellencamp once wrote "There is nothing more sad or glorious than generations changing hands." This statement is an elegant account of both the dualism inherent in many family events as well as the dramatic range of feelings that family members might have concerning a given event. Families that cope best with stressful events are those who are able to recast or reframe the event in a positive light. This allows family members to (1) clarify issues, hardships, and tasks and render them more manageable, (2) decrease the intensity of emotional burden created by the event, and (3) encourage members to carry on with the family's fundamental tasks (McCubbin & Patterson, 1985; McKenry & Price, 2000). There are many different ways of looking at the same event. Like resources, positive appraisals can buffer against the ill effects associated with potentially stressful events.

Stress and Crisis (X)

The X factor in Hill's ABC-X model is the stress and crisis actually experienced by the family. This is thought to be a product of the event, the family's resources, and the family's perceptions of the event. The family's stress experience is their reaction or response to the event or situation (filtered through their resources and perceptions). Stress and crisis are two different types of reaction to challenging events and situations. *Crisis* is an overwhelming disturbance in

the family's equilibrium that involves severe pressure on and incapacitation of the family system (Boss, 1988; McKenry & Price, 2000). When a family is in a state of crisis they are in genuine disorder and are unable to function normally or effectively. Customary roles and routines are often abandoned and boundaries are dramatically changed when a family is in crisis. Alternatively, *stress* denotes a change in the family's steady state. So long as these changes do not over tax the family's resources and coping skills, there may be no negative outcomes for the family. As McKenry and Price (2000) note, crisis is a dichotomous variable. The family is either in a state of crisis or not. Stress is a continuous variable. A family can experience varying degrees of stress. Because stress merely represents a change or disturbance in the family's normal state and routines, it is easy to see why stress is not inherently bad. Many families may benefit from some stress. The experience of stress can sometimes cause families to abandon harmful practices, as when family members try to prepare healthy meals after one family member had a heart attack.

The Double ABC-X Model

Hill's ABC-X model of family stress has been very influential over the past 50 years (Huang, 1991). However, the model was refined by McCubbin and Patterson (1982) in recognition of the fact that family stress unfolds over time, and that families develop new perceptions and new resources after they initially experience the event or situation. Accordingly, McCubbin and Patterson (1982, 1983) developed the Double ABC-X model of family stress. This expanded version of the original ABC-X model is depicted in Figure 10.2.

As evident in Figure 10.2, the Double ABC-X model is divided into precrisis and postcrisis stages. The variables in the precrisis stage are identical to Hill's original ABC-X model (i.e., stressor, resources, perception, and crisis). The postcrisis factors were included to better explain how and why families adapt to the stressful situation once it is encountered.

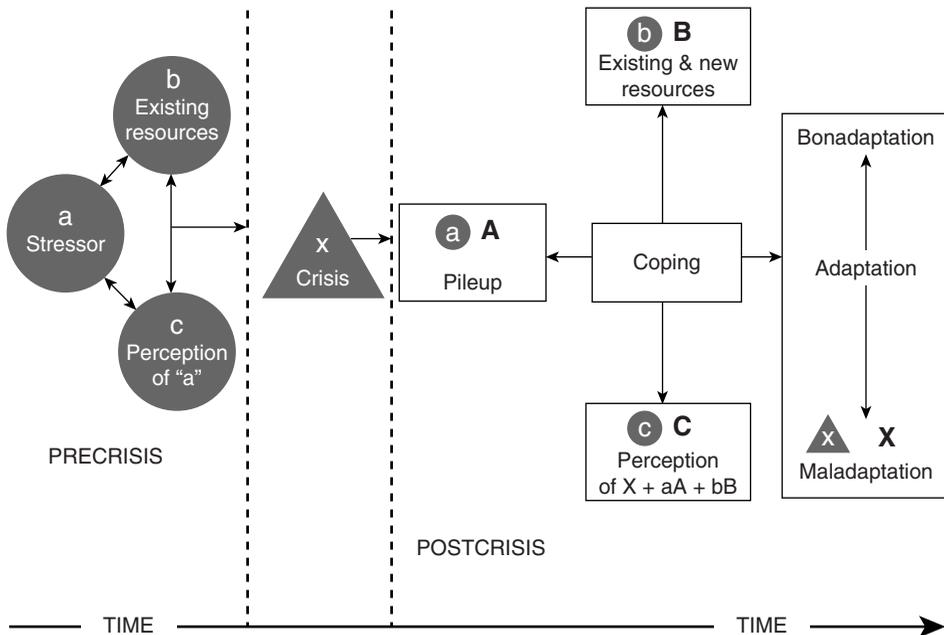


Figure 10.2 McCubbin and Patterson's (1982) Double ABC-X model of family stress.

Note. From H.I. McCubbin & J.M. Patterson (1982). *Family Stress, Coping, and Support*. Courtesy of Charles C. Thomas Publishers, Ltd., Springfield, IL.

Stressor Pileup (aA)

McCubbin and Patterson (1982) note that stressors rarely occur in isolation from other problems. Often stressful events are associated with other issues, events, and situations that are themselves stressful to the family. These authors suggest that there are several types of stressors that contribute to stress pileup in the family. First, the *initial stressor event* has its own set of hardships that can move the family into a state of crisis. Second, *family life changes* are often ongoing at the time that the initial event is experienced and happen regardless of the initial stressor. Finally, *consequences of family coping* efforts often bring on an additional set of stressors. For example, if a child is diagnosed with a serious illness, that illness could function as an initial stressor on the family. At the same time that the family is dealing with this stressor, they may also be in the process of launching their oldest child and caring for an aging grandparent. These family life changes only further compound the family's stress over the sick child. If an overwhelmed parent turns to heavy drinking in order to cope with the demands of these stressors to soothe his or her nerves, this coping mechanism may bring on further stressors such as a drunk driving conviction, missed work, and failure to meet other obligations due to intoxication. Collectively, all of these different stressors that come in the wake of the child's illness constitute stressor pileup, and potentially make a bad situation even worse. In a study of families with autistic or communication-impaired children, stress pileup proved to be the most consistent and strongest predictor of family adjustment (Bristol, 1987). Menees and Segrin (2000) found that children who were exposed to the stress of an alcoholic parent were anywhere from two to four times more likely than children without an alcoholic parent to have been exposed to additional family stressors such as parental separation, divorce, or unemployment. These findings illustrate McCubbin and Patterson's point that family stressors rarely occur in isolation and that the pileup of stressors has a major impact on family outcomes.

Existing and New Resources (bB)

In the Double ABC-X model there are two types of family resources. The first is the family's existing resources at the time of the initial stressor. These are available at the time of initial impact and allow the family to minimize the immediate consequences of the stressor and, in the best case scenario, prevent the family from entering into a state of crisis. The second set of resources is characterized as *coping resources* (McCubbin & Patterson, 1982). These are personal, family, or social resources that are developed or strengthened in response to the initial stressor. Coping resources might include social support that is mobilized after the initial stressor, or new skills that the family develops in order to handle the initial stressor. Recall from the discussion of stress pileup that sometimes these post crisis coping efforts may bring on new stressors as well. Ideally, the family's postcrisis resources will be factors that help to minimize the negative effects of the stressful event or situation while allowing the family to effectively adapt to this new challenge in their lives.

Perception (cC)

The double C factor in the Double ABC-X model is the family's perception of (1) the initial stressor event, and (2) the stress/crisis produced by that event, as well as any stress pileup that followed. Like the original C factor, this factor entails the family's perception and definition of the situation that they find themselves in. McCubbin and Patterson (1982) state that a family's postcrisis perceptions can involve religious beliefs, a redefinition of the original situation, and endowing the situation with meaning. Over time, people tend to look at many stressful situations differently than when they first encountered them. When families reframe an event in a more positive light, the amount of stress that they experience may be minimized. For instance, if a troubled adolescent is picked up by the police and jailed for theft, the family may initially

be shocked and upset. The parents may feel like failures and fear for their child's future. However, as time progresses, the family may reframe the initial stressor in more positive terms. For instance, they may feel that contact with the criminal justice system might be a "wake up call" for the troubled adolescent. Perhaps he or she might be required to enroll in a drug treatment program because the theft was committed so that the adolescent could get money to buy drugs. They may feel that this will scare the child and put him or her back on track, away from a life of crime. In this way, the family is seeing new meaning and even some potential benefits to what was originally a stressful and shocking event. The double C factor in this model is an explicit recognition of the fact that perceptions are not static. They evolve and change over time.

Family Crisis and Adaptation (xX)

The double X factor in the model is the family's ultimate adaptation to the crisis. McCubbin and Patterson (1982) define adaptation as "the process of stimulus regulation, environmental control, and balancing to achieve a level of functioning, which preserves family unity and enhances the family system and member growth and development" (p. 45). Stimulus regulation and environmental control involve literally taking control of the situation that produced the initial stress and the surrounding environment (e.g., immediate family, extended family, local community) in which the family exists. In stimulus regulation, the family selectively lets in or shuts out demands that are imposed by the stressful event. In some cases they may have to resort to denial in order to accomplish stimulus regulation. In environmental control the family tries to influence the type and quality of demands that are placed on them. Balancing entails making accommodations or compromises in order to adjust to the stressor and perhaps assimilating the stressful event or situation into their daily lives and routines. Some stressors, such as the death or chronic illness of an immediate family member, are permanent and often unchanging in their nature. These require family members to make equally permanent changes in the structure of their roles and routines, thereby assimilating the stressor into the fundamental fabric of the family's life. Unlike the X factor in the precrisis state (crisis), the X factor in the postcrisis state (adaptation) is really a continuum. The family's degree of adaptation can range from maladaptation (from the French word "mal," meaning bad or poorly) on the low end to bonadaptation (from the French word "bon," meaning good) on the high end. A family in a state of maladaptation is in crisis. However, a family in a state of bonadaptation is probably functioning *better* after the stressor than before. Bonadaptation implies that the demands on the family unit are matched by the resources that they have available (McCubbin & Patterson, 1982). For some families that mobilize their resources and reframe stressful events in a positive light, the experience can lead to a form of hyper-coping in which the family functioning is literally improved following the stressor.

Additional Concepts in the Double ABC-X Model

Proponents of the Double ABC-X model of family stress often use concepts in addition to events, resources, perceptions, and stress in order to understand how families function under stress. McCubbin and Patterson (1982) suggest that vulnerability and regenerative power are useful for understanding how families defend themselves against a crisis and how they recover from a crisis. *Vulnerability* is the family's ability to prevent stressors from creating a crisis situation. As we mentioned earlier in this section, the family's resources (B) play a major role in determining their vulnerability. For the most part, the more resources the family has available, the lower their vulnerability is. *Regenerative power* is the family's ability to bounce back and recover from a crisis. Like certain lizards that can rapidly regrow a severed tail, some families have a remarkable ability to recover from states of crisis. This concept is similar to what some refer to as resiliency (Olson, Lavee, & McCubbin, 1988). According to the Double ABC-X

model, those families with good resources, optimistic perceptions, and functional coping responses should have high regenerative power. Finally, research on the Double ABC-X model has highlighted the role of *boundary ambiguity* (McCubbin & Patterson, 1982). Boundary ambiguity occurs when family members are unsure about who is in or out of the system and who occupies what roles. When a father goes off to war, for example, the remaining family members may be uncertain about who will take over the family functions that were previously taken care of by the now absent father. Perhaps a close relative will spend more time with the family and help out. This may raise questions about how to treat that person. Is he or she now a member of the immediate family? These sorts of questions and dilemmas can be stressful for the family and contribute to stressor pileup.

The Role of Family Communication in the ABC-X and Double ABC-X Models

Although not explicitly labeled as a component of either model, family communication plays an important role in both the ABC-X and Double ABC-X models. In most cases, family communication could be viewed as a resource (B) that could help to buffer against the ill effects of stress or as a vulnerability factor in the case of families with poor communication. Family communication plays a vital role in processes such as social support, coping, information exchange, and problem solving. A study of stress among intergenerational farm families revealed that participants, especially members of the older generation, saw family communication (e.g., showing positive feelings) as a resource for coping with their stress (Weigel & Weigel, 1993). For families that have clear, direct, open, and responsive styles of communication, that pattern of behavior literally becomes a resource on which they can draw during times of stress. Alternatively, families with ambiguous, indirect, and minimal communication patterns would be more vulnerable to the experience of stressful events and situations. This is because they would have a hard time mobilizing the family resources that would allow them to effectively cope with and respond to the demands imposed by the stressful event. In extreme cases, these problematic family communication patterns can become stressors in their own right. In chapter 14 we discuss how dysfunctional family communication patterns such as expressed emotion and communication deviance can function as a stressor that exacerbates the course of certain mental health problems experienced by family members.

The beneficial effect of family communication as a resource in times of stress is illustrated in a study on the transition to parenthood among adolescent African American and Latino couples (Florsheim et al., 2003). These researchers followed 14–19 year old mothers and their partners as they became first-time parents. Most were still living in their family of origin. They found that young parents who had good relationships with their own parents, as indexed by supportive interactions and minimal conflict for example, maintained good relationships with their partner and exhibited lower risk for parental dysfunction (i.e., parental stress and child abuse potential). Despite the fact that these young couples were experiencing a major life stressor, good communication and relationships with their parents and each other proved to be associated with better outcomes for the family.

Another important role of family communication in the ABC-X models is in the process of perception (C). The family's perception or definition of a stressor is theorized to play a vital role in their ultimate reaction and adaptation to the event or situation. Family perceptions develop largely as a result of the family's communication about the stressful event. Recall from chapter 2 that according to the theory of symbolic interaction, shared realities are created through interaction with other people. What does a parent's layoff from work mean to a young child? What does a mother's diagnosis of breast cancer mean to her adolescent children? Answers to questions such as these emerge as a product of the family's communication about the stressor. Particularly for younger family members who may not understand the stressful event, there is at best a vague notion of what the stressor implies for the family. In healthy families, parents and children talk about the meaning and impact of the stressor. Often parents

may try to shield their younger children from the stress that could be associated with the event or situation. In so doing, they minimize the potentially aversive impact of the event on the young children by trying to offer a benign definition or perception of the situation. Of course, this tactic can be taken too far such that family members remain in the dark about the true meaning of the stressor to their own detriment. In either case, however, the ultimate family perception of the event is created, shaped, revised, and sustained through family communication.

The Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response Model

Patterson extended many of the principles and concepts in the Double ABC-X model into the Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response Model (FAAR; Patterson, 1988, 1989). The FAAR model (see Figure 10.3) focuses on how the family maintains a balanced level of functioning based on its resources and coping behaviors as it confronts various stressors. The model starts out with the assumption that all families must confront and meet certain *demands*. These can be stressors (life events that occur at a particular point in time) or strains (a lasting condition or felt tension that is accompanied by the desire to change something). Just as in the Double ABC-X model, Patterson (1988, 1989) assumed that demands can pile up.

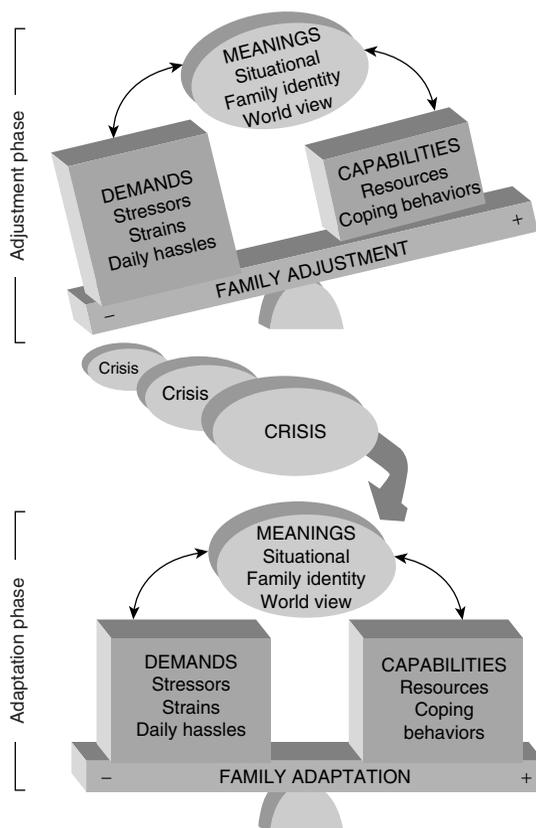


Figure 10.3 Patterson's Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response Model.

Note. From "Families Experiencing Stress: The Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response Model," by J. M. Patterson, 1988, *Family Systems Medicine*, 6(2), pp. 202–237. Copyright 1988 by Families, Systems & Health, Inc. Adapted with permission.

What offsets the burden of demands is the family's *capabilities*. These include resources (what the family has) and coping behaviors (what the family does). Patterson (1988) explains that family resources are characteristics or traits that the family has that will help them to meet their demands. Notably, Patterson emphasized communication skill as a critical family resource. Effective family communication is thought to be so important because it helps the family to coordinate their efforts to meet demands and to help reduce the ambiguity that makes change so stressful. In addition to resources, family coping helps to counteract the effect of demands. In the FAAR model, coping is conceptualized as the family's efforts to reduce or manage a demand (Patterson, 1988). We will take up the issue of family coping in more detail later in this chapter. Patterson argues that family coping can address demands by seeking to (1) directly reduce the number or intensity of demands, (2) allow for the acquisition of additional resources, (3) maintain existing resources, (4) manage tension with ongoing strains, and (5) reappraise the meaning of a situation to make it more tolerable.

The combination of demands and capabilities influences the *meanings* that the family assigns to their situation. The concept of family meanings in the FAAR model is almost identical to the C (perception) factor in the Double ABC-X model. In the FAAR model, family meanings are thought to exist at both the situational (the family's subjective definition of their demands and capabilities) and global (the family's cognitive schema for how it views relationships among family members and to the larger community) level (Patterson, 1988). So for example, the family of a juvenile delinquent might feel frustrated and angered by their felt inability to control and get through to their adolescent child. At the same time they might feel part of a larger community to whom their child owes some debt and who could also play a role in helping them to work with the troubled child.

In keeping with the tradition of the Double ABC-X model, the FAAR model also assumes that the family goes through an *adjustment phase* where there are stable patterns of family interaction and where new family demands are often met with avoidance (denying the demand), elimination (getting rid of the demand), or assimilation (accepting the demand). During the *crisis phase* families are in the thick of dealing with demands for which their current interaction patterns and capabilities are not sufficient. The FAAR model presumes that families eventually end up in an *adaptation phase* where they work to restore balance to their system so that their capabilities meet their level of demands. Of course, effective and efficient family communication would play a vital role in the family's adaptation to its demands by functioning as a vital coping process (Patterson, 2002).

Olson's Systems Model of Family Stress

Recall from chapter 1 that one of the major models of family functioning was developed by Olson and his colleagues and is centered around the twin concepts of adaptability (or flexibility) and cohesion (Olson, 1993; Olson et al., 1979). As we discussed in chapter 1, the most functional families according to this approach are those that are balanced in their levels of adaptability and cohesion. However, there is some evidence indicating a linear relationship between adaptability, cohesion, and positive family outcomes (Farrell & Barnes, 1993). This perspective has been fruitfully extended to the domain of family stress and has produced a number of predications about families that are best able to handle stressors. One of the more fundamental hypotheses from this perspective is that families will adjust their levels of adaptability and cohesion in response to situational stressors and changes that result from progression through the family life cycle (Olson, 1983; Olson & McCubbin, 1982). Even though moderate amounts of adaptability and cohesion are optimal for family functioning, there are times when it is best for the family to at least temporarily alter their adaptability and cohesion in response to stressful events. Naturally, healthy families will make adjustments in response to environmental stressors. On the other hand, dysfunctional families often remain rooted at extremes on the adaptability and cohesion dimensions, unable to make adjustments in response

to stressors. For example, a healthy family with moderate degrees of adaptability and cohesion might find it most helpful to increase their cohesion (in the direction of enmeshment) and increase their adaptability (in the direction of chaos) after a member of the immediate family is seriously injured in a car accident. The increased cohesion facilitates the exchange of social and emotional support. The heightened adaptability allows family members to assume each other's roles and cover for each other so that they can simultaneously attend to the injured family member while still taking care of routine family business. Of course, in a functional family, these extreme levels of adaptability and cohesion that allow the family to effectively cope with the stressor would be expected to subside as the impact of the stressor event declines. Ultimately, such families would be expected to return to "normal" levels of adaptability and cohesion as they adjust to the stressor. Olson and McCubbin (1982) are quick to point out that the most functional changes in response to stress are those that are moderate, such as a shift from flexible to structured, as opposed to a dramatic shift from chaotic to rigid.

A related prediction rooted in this perspective is that troubled families will either not change their adaptability and cohesion when stressed, or that they will make dramatic changes from one extreme to the other (Olson et al., 1979). As we mentioned earlier, some dysfunctional families are unable to adjust their levels of adaptability and cohesion in response to stressors. However, there are some dysfunctional families that dramatically swing from, say, disengaged all the way to enmeshed upon experiencing a stressful event or situation. These families come across as unstable and may be somewhat chaotic. These wild swings in adaptability and cohesion can themselves become a source of stress, potentially contributing to stress pileup. According to Olson and his associates, the most functional families will make temporary adjustments in their adaptability and cohesion in order to meet the demands of a stressor, but these adjustments are moderate, not dramatic.

What allows families to make the necessary changes in their adaptability and cohesion in order to effectively cope with stressful events? As we discussed in chapter 1, Olson suggests that family communication skills facilitate movement and adjustment along the adaptability and cohesion continua. Families with positive communication skills such as clear messages, effective problem-solving, supportive statements, and demonstration of empathy are hypothesized to be able to alter their adaptability and cohesion in response to stressors. Alternatively, families that do not listen well to each other, who use indirect messages, and who are excessively critical of each other are expected to be locked into one particular level of adaptability and cohesion, usually at one of the extremes, unable to change when they encounter a stressful event or situation.

Earlier we mentioned that families need to adjust their adaptability and cohesion in response to both situational stressors and ordinary progressions through the family life cycle. In other words, a married couple with two adolescent children may need to function at a different level of adaptability than a retired couple with no children. Research has consistently shown that well-functioning families at different stages in the family life style tend to exhibit predictably different levels of adaptability and cohesion (Olson & Lavee, 1989; Olson et al., 1988). For example, the majority of young couples without children are moderately high in both their cohesion and adaptability. Once children become part of the family the situation changes considerably. Families with young children tend to be more structured in their adaptability, while showing slight decreases in cohesion. When teenagers become part of the picture, this pattern is even more accentuated. A much greater percentage (60%) of families with teens are separated in their cohesion compared to young couples without children (29%) (Olson & Lavee, 1989). Older couples whose children have left home tend to exhibit adaptability levels that are comparable to young couples without children, and cohesion levels that are comparable to families with teens, but lower than young couples without children. As families progress through the life cycle and respond to the different stresses and strains that are imposed by these developmental challenges, they make moderate adjustments in their adaptability and cohesion. In functional families these changes are a natural part of the family life cycle.

However, dysfunctional families show a greater tendency to remain stuck at one level of adaptability and one level of cohesion, unable to adjust in order to adequately meet the demands of the changing family life cycle.

Olson's systems model of family stress also predicts that families will first draw on internal resources before using external resources to manage family stress (Olson, 1997). Internal resources can be found within the family system. These include such things as social support, good communication, tangible assistance with tasks, financial resources that the family has, and the use of special skills that family members can use to manage the stressor. External resources are located outside of the family system, and include such things as community-based assistance programs, professional counseling or therapy, and law enforcement intervention. Using this knowledge, one could accurately assume that families who tap into external resources (e.g., calling the police to help settle domestic disputes, or visiting the community food bank to get food) are under a great degree of stress. Contact with these external agencies suggests that they were unable to bring resolution to their problems or meet the demand of the stressor with the resources that they had within the family system. It implies that the family has effectively exhausted its internal resources for addressing the stressor.

The Vulnerability–Stress–Adaptation Model of Marriage

Thus far we have examined several models of family stress that take a system-wide perspective to understanding the family's experience of and response to stress. A more recent addition to the roster of family stress models was proposed by Karney and Bradbury (1995) in their Vulnerability–Stress–Adaptation Model of Marriage. This model differs from other family stress models in some important ways. First, this is a model that is specific to the marital subsystem. Second, unlike those models that begin with the stressful event or experience, Karney and Bradbury's model explicitly assumes that marital partners have preexisting vulnerabilities that color husbands' and wives' reactions to stress. Finally, the model assumes that the presence of stress affects the stability and satisfaction of the marriage. In other words, the quality of this family subsystem is partially a function of the stress that the couple experiences. The Vulnerability–Stress–Adaptation model is depicted in Figure 10.4.

In the Vulnerability–Stress–Adaptation model, *stressful events* are assumed to have an impact on *adaptive processes* in the marriage (depicted as path A in Figure 10.4). Adaptive processes are those behaviors that spouses exchange, such as positive communication and problem solving, that allow them to adjust to their roles within the marriage and to cope with challenges

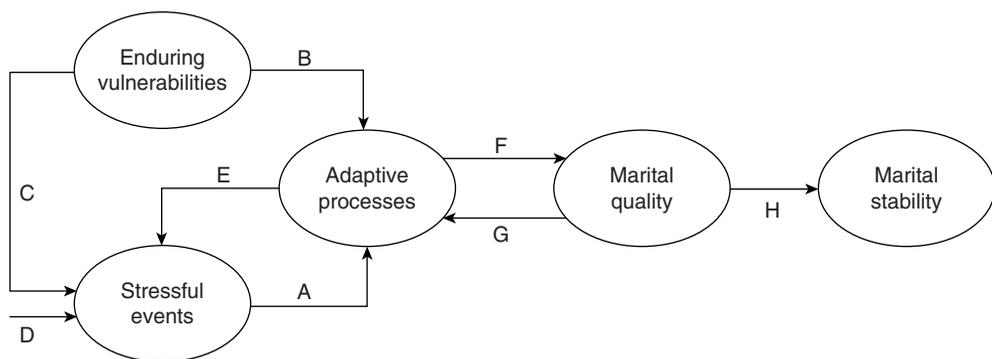


Figure 10.4 Karney and Bradbury's Vulnerability–Stress–Adaptation Model of Marriage.

Note. Karney, B.R., & Bradbury, T.N. (1995). The longitudinal course of marital quality and stability: A review of theory, method, and research. *Psychological Bulletin*, 118, 3–34. Published by American Psychological Association. Reprinted with permission.

that they encounter. The experience of stress tends to have a negative influence on these processes (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), which can then threaten the quality of the marriage. The model also assumes that spouses bring with them certain backgrounds or *enduring vulnerabilities* that influence both adaptive processes (path B) and the experience of stressful events (path C). Enduring vulnerabilities are backgrounds and traits that husbands and wives bring into their marriage. Consider, for example, poor communication skills as an enduring vulnerability. To begin with, people with poor communication skills will presumably have a harder time adjusting to their role as husband or wife. Negotiating expectations, clarifying preferences, and blending into extended family systems are all interpersonal tasks that present challenges to people with poor communication skills. At the same time, the model predicts that people with poor skills will actually experience more stressful events. This phenomenon is characterized as the stress generation effect (Segrin, 2001a). Someone with poor communication skills may experience excessive arguments with his or her partner and have a hard time creating positive interactions and experiences within the marriage. The net result of this enduring vulnerability is that the couple may actually experience more stressful events.

Similar to the Double ABC-X model, Karney and Bradbury's model assumes that adaptive processes will influence the likelihood of encountering stressful events (path E). Couples with good adaptive processes can cope well with stressful events and keep them from piling up. On the other hand, couples with poor adaptive processes will respond to stress in such a way as to actually increase the probability of experiencing more stressful events. Karney and Bradbury (1995) note that this sets up a vicious cycle in which stressful events tax the couple's capacity for adaptation, which in turn contributes to worsening of the events, which only serves to further hinder the couple's capacity for adaptation. These adaptive processes play a vital role in the Vulnerability–Stress–Adaptation model because they are seen as proximal and reciprocal causes of *marital quality* (paths F and G). Marital quality is the couple's overall evaluation of and satisfaction with their marriage. Marriages that have good adaptive processes (i.e., the partners exchange positive behaviors, have rewarding interactions, adjust well to tasks in the marriage) are assumed to have higher quality than those with poor adaptive processes. At the same time, the quality of the marriage is assumed to influence adaptive processes. Naturally, partners who are happy with their marriage are more likely to exchange positive behaviors, treat each other graciously, and work hard at solving marital problems compared to partners who are unhappy with their marriage. In this way, marital quality can actually enhance couples' adaptive processes.

Ultimately, the Vulnerability–Stress–Adaptation model assumes that marital quality is a proximal predictor of *marital stability* (path H). Marital stability simply refers to the duration of the marriage, and in particular, whether the couple stays together. Research findings generally show that marital satisfaction has stronger effects on marital stability than most other variables that have been examined as potential predictors of marital stability (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). However, Karney and Bradbury are quick to point out that this effect is still only moderate in magnitude. They suggest that this may be due to the fact that most unstable (i.e., broken up) marriages are marked by dissatisfaction, but not all stable (i.e., intact) marriages are marked by satisfaction.

The Vulnerability–Stress–Adaptation model has proven to be a useful tool for predicting the course and trajectory of newlywed marriages, and marital communication appears to be an important adaptive process. For example, the expression of emotional states and use of integrative behavior (e.g., describing a problem in a nonevaluative manner, expressing understanding, soliciting disclosure from one's partner) during problem solving discussions, both of which are adaptive processes, have been shown to facilitate adjustment and satisfaction in newlywed marriages (Cohan & Bradbury, 1997). The tendency to engage in positive problem solving (e.g., proposing mutually acceptable solutions) during conflicts, is an adaptive process that appears lacking in people with certain negative personality traits (i.e., enduring vulnerability), which in turn predicts lower marital satisfaction in newlyweds (Hanzal & Segrin, 2009).

Finally, Langer, Lawrence, and Barry (2008) also studied negative personality traits as vulnerabilities, and found that they predicted both stress and physical aggression toward the spouse among newlywed couples. Research guided by the Vulnerability–Stress–Adaptation model clearly shows that one of the problems associated with many negative personality traits (*enduring vulnerabilities*) is that they are associated with a number of destructive marital communication practices, or lack of functional practices (*adaptive processes*) that in turn corrode *marital quality* and lessen *marital stability*.

FAMILY COPING WITH STRESS

The concept of coping or adaptation figures prominently in most theoretical models of family stress. Family coping involves the active strategies and behaviors that families enact in order to manage and adapt to stressful situations (McCubbin & Dahl, 1985). In the ABC-X model coping is considered to be a family resource, and in the Double ABC-X model coping is assumed to influence stress-pile up, resources, perceptions, and adaptation to the stressor (McCubbin & Patterson, 1982). Family coping has a powerful impact on the relationship between stressful events and the family's stress reaction to those events. There are a number of hypotheses that explain this relationship (McCubbin et al., 1980). First, effective family coping behaviors are thought to decrease vulnerabilities to stressors. Second, family coping strategies can strengthen or maintain family resources such as cohesiveness, organization, and adaptability. Third, effective coping in the family can reduce or eliminate stressor events and their negative consequences. Finally, family coping behaviors may actively alter the environment by changing social circumstances surrounding the stressor and its experience.

Taxonomies of Family Coping Strategies

There is a wide range of coping strategies that families will enact when they encounter stressors. These run from tactics that are generally helpful for reducing the ill effects of the stressor to strategies that can actually worsen the impact of the stressor. For example, psychologists Robert and Anita Plutchik developed a taxonomy of eight basic strategies that families use to cope with stress (Plutchik & Plutchik, 1990). *Mapping* is coping with a problem by trying to obtain more information about it. *Avoidance* involves coping with a problem by removing the family members from situations that produce the stressor. Families that use *help-seeking* cope with stress by asking for help from other family members, neighbors, coworkers, or experts. *Minimization* is an attempt to cope by psychologically reducing the importance, significance, or seriousness of the stressor. Some families cope through *reversal* in which they act the exact opposite of how they feel. For example, the angrier they get with someone, the more polite and generous family members may behave toward that person. When families cope with *blame* they try to make themselves feel good by assigning responsibility for the problem to other people or external factors. *Substitution* is a coping strategy in which families employ indirect methods to solve a problem. Substitution is most often used when there are no direct methods for dealing with a problem. For example, family members who feel stressed out by their jobs and school will often take a pleasant vacation. Quitting work or school is not an option, but the vacation allows the family time to relax and at least temporarily escape the stressor. Finally, *improving shortcomings* is a technique that families use when they carefully consider how they contributed to the stressor and then try to improve aspects of their lives in order to deal with the stressor and prevent its reoccurrence. Note that not all of these coping strategies involve actual behaviors. Sometimes family members will cope with a stressor not by acting or communicating, but rather by denying the problem or changing the way that they think about it.

For Plutchik and Plutchik (1990), communication is a fundamental element of families' efforts at coping with stressful events. They observe that "for every problem, however small or large, there are many possible solutions...it has been our experience that most people tend to use one style of communication most of the time. When this particular style does not work, they become angry and frustrated rather than simply switching to an alternative approach" (p. 36). Plutchik and Plutchik are suggesting here that effective coping almost always entails some flexibility in the substance and style of family members' interactions following the stressor. Families that are locked into one style of communicating are, in the long run, going to have more trouble coping with stressors than families that can adjust their style of interaction to meet the demands of the situation.

A complementary taxonomy of family coping methods was developed by Burr and Klein (1994), in which they identified seven highly abstract strategies that have emerged from research on family coping. Each of these strategies is in turn associated with a number of less abstract, or more specific, strategies. Burr and Klein's (1994) taxonomy is summarized in Table 10.1. One noteworthy aspect of this taxonomy is Burr and Klein's explicit recognition of family communication as an actual coping strategy (see also Olson, 1997). They find that certain positive communication behaviors such as being open and honest, carefully listening to each other, and paying careful attention to each other's nonverbal behaviors can function as effective coping mechanisms for family members in times of stress. Presumably many of these communication tactics work by putting family members "on the same page" as they are confronted with a stressor. When family members misunderstand each other, the effects of a stressor can be intensified. These communication strategies substantially decrease the likelihood of such an occurrence. It is also worth noting that what Burr and Klein (1994) refer to as "communication" is actually a collection of strategies, some associated with message production (e.g., exchanging information, being honest) and some with message reception (e.g., listening, being sensitive).

Table 10.1 Burr and Klein's conceptual framework of family coping strategies

| <i>Highly Abstract Strategies</i> | <i>Moderately Abstract Strategies</i> |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| • Cognitive | - be accepting of the situation and others - gain useful knowledge - change how the situation is viewed or defined (reframe) |
| • Emotional | - express feelings and affection - avoid or resolve negative feelings and disabling expressions of emotion - be sensitive to others' emotional needs |
| • Relationships | - increase cohesion (togetherness) - develop increased trust - increase cooperation - increase tolerance of each other |
| • Communication | - be open and honest - listen to each other - be sensitive to nonverbal communication |
| • Community | - seek help and support from others - fulfill expectations in organizations |
| • Spiritual | - be more involved in religious activities - increase faith or seek help from God |
| • Individual development | - develop autonomy, independence, and self-sufficiency - keep active in hobbies |

Note. From Burr, W.R., and Klein, S.R. (1994). *Reexamining Family Stress: New Theory and Research*, p. 133. Copyright © 1994 by Sage Publications. Reprinted with permission of Sage Publications, Inc.

When most people think about coping with a problem, they tend to think about the things that we do to lessen the impact of a stressor and to effectively resolve the difficulties that it presents. However, researchers agree that family coping strategies can have both positive and negative effects (McCubbin et al., 1980; Plutchik & Plutchik, 1990). Recall from our discussion of the Double ABC-X model that certain coping strategies can lead to stress pileup. This happens when family coping literally becomes a source of stress. How does this happen? McCubbin et al. (1980) suggest that there are at least three ways that family coping strategies can actually be a source of stress. First, some coping strategies may indirectly damage the family system. If a family tries to shield its children from the crime-ridden neighborhood in which they live by sending them to an exclusive private school on the other side of town, the exorbitant tuition that they pay may actually create financial hardships that effectively become a family stressor in their own right. Second, some family coping strategies cause direct harm to the family system. When family members turn to drugs or alcohol as a means of coping with hardship, they may experience secondary stressors that are directly linked to these behaviors such as drink-driving convictions and missed work. Third, some family coping mechanisms create further stress by interfering with the adaptive behaviors that could enhance the family's well-being. For example, some family members may use denial as a coping mechanism. Unfortunately, this will do nothing to motivate family members to pursue effective solutions to the problem that plagues them. In the mean time, the problem may actually worsen. It is clear that effective coping strategies certainly have the potential to greatly minimize the negative effects of stressors. At the same time, there are some families that employ coping strategies that are literally antagonistic to effective solutions to their problems. In such cases the coping strategies literally produce more stressors, contributing to stress pileup.

As families cope with the stressors that they encounter, they directly and indirectly teach coping mechanisms to their children (Chambers, 1999; Kliewer, Fearnow, & Miller, 1996). Kliewer et al. (1996) suggest that one way that this happens is through *coaching*. In coaching, parents directly instruct their children on how to handle the various problems that they encounter. Coaching might entail explaining the meaning of the stressor to the child and recommending concrete methods for addressing the stressor. This advice is often consistent with the parents' own preferred coping styles. Another mechanism by which families transmit coping strategies to their children is through *modeling*. Recall from chapter 2 that social learning theory explains how children will pick up behaviors by observing their parents enact those behaviors, especially when there are positive outcomes connected to the coping behaviors. Kliewer and her associates found that mothers who used less active coping strategies had daughters who also used less active coping strategies. Mothers who modeled avoidant coping methods also had sons who reported more avoidant coping strategies. These results suggest that children will often pick up their parents' preferred mechanisms for coping by simply observing them in stressful situations. So, if a parent comes home from a difficult day at work and proceeds to drink large amounts of alcohol, and then starts to exhibit a more pleasant mood, children who repeatedly observe this coping strategy would be very likely to eventually enact the same behaviors when they are stressed.

Family Coping and Stress Appraisal

Psychologists refer to the assessment of stressors and the degree to which they are threatening as *primary appraisal*, and to assessment of coping resources for dealing with those stressors as *secondary appraisal* (Lazarus, 1966). Presumably family coping strategies are effective when they alter primary appraisals by removing the stressor and/or making it seem less threatening, or when they alter secondary appraisals by enhancing perceptions of family members' ability to handle the stressor (Wills, Blechman, & McNamara, 1996). Consistent with this notion, a study of dual worker couples revealed that the best predictor of marital adjustment was not the hardships that they experienced but rather their communication (a coping resource) and their

relational efficacy (i.e., the couple's appraisal of their ability to deal with problems) (Meeks, Arnkoff, Glass, & Notarius, 1986). Menees (1997) also found that children of an alcoholic parent had highest self-esteem when they coped with stressors via family problem solving and ventilation. Young people who engage in family problem solving work together with their parents to address their stressors. Although it may seem ironic that this would be an effective strategy in children of alcoholics, the fact that the stressor emerged from the family of origin makes that same family an especially powerful force for shaping the child's primary and secondary appraisals. Ventilation is a coping strategy that involves talking with other people to get things out in the open rather than keeping them to oneself. This sort of coping may engage other people and solicit input from them that could be vital in altering primary and secondary appraisals for the better. Sometimes just talking to other people about a problem can make the problem seem not so bad.

Communal Coping

Many of the family coping strategies covered earlier in this section could be enacted by family members individually. However, there are many cases where families (e.g., parents and their children, wives and their husbands) cope with problems together, as a unit. This phenomenon is known as *communal coping*. Communal coping refers to appraising and acting on a problem in the context of a relationship by pooling resources and efforts to address the problem (Lyons, Mickelson, Sullivan, & Coyne, 1998). According to Lyons and associates, the key to communal coping is that family members perceive the stressor as "our" problem versus "my" or "your" problem. Furthermore, they decide as a unit that the problem is "our" responsibility. Seeing the stressor as "our" problem reflects an appraisal that is communal rather than individual in nature. Seeing the required action as "our" responsibility implies that coping strategies and solutions will be enacted by the family as a whole, rather than by just one person in the family. Lyons et al. explain that the process of communal coping can be broken down into three main components. The first component is a *communal coping orientation*. This is the belief that the family must join together in order to effectively address the problem. Second, communal coping involves *communication about the stressor*. Because communal coping is inherently social, family members must discuss the details of how the problem happened, what they think can be done to address it, and how it will affect the family. Finally, there must be some *cooperative action* in communal coping. This simply means that family members collaborate to develop strategies and enact remedies to deal with the stressor.

Research findings consistently show that communal coping is very effective and is generally associated with positive outcomes for families dealing with stressors. For example, pregnant women experience fewer symptoms of depression to the extent that their partners (e.g., spouses, family members) use active prosocial coping strategies such as joining together to deal with the problems that they experience (Monnier & Hobfoll, 1997). Men's success in adjusting to and recovering from a heart attack is dependent upon the efforts of their wives who create changes in the couple's diet and daily routine, as well as and the couple's ability to work together to make lifestyle changes (Coyne, Ellard, & Smith, 1990). Employees who live in families with high levels of cohesion and adaptability, and who have open family communication and good family problem solving styles, tend to have significantly lower levels of burnout from their jobs (Appel & Kim-Appel, 2008).

Sometimes one subunit in the family can work together to shield other family members from the ill effects of stress. During the 1980s there was a severe economic downturn in rural economy that had devastating effects on families and their farms. Family scientists Rand and Katherine Conger studied how rural families coped with the stressors imposed by these austere circumstances (Conger & Conger, 2002). They found that children and adolescents in the family do not experience stress directly as a result of the economic conditions but rather through the responses of their parents to the financial hardships facing the family.

Consequently, if husbands and wives exhibited strong social support toward each other, they were generally unlikely to show outward signs of emotional distress and their children therefore did not experience significant trauma as a result of the family's financial hardships. Conger and Conger theorized that if parents can contain their emotional distress and interpersonal conflicts while maintaining their parenting skills (e.g., being nurturant and involved with the children), their children can weather the storm without any real adjustment problems or emotional distress of their own. One way that rural families pulled together during the terrible farm economy was to maintain close ties between the parents while simultaneously demonstrating affection, warmth, and minimal hostility toward the children. In these cases the parents worked together to provide a positive atmosphere for their children so that the children could prosper developmentally despite the adverse circumstances that faced the family.

FAMILY SOCIAL SUPPORT

Social support is one of the most important and fundamental forms of family communication. It could be argued that a primary function of the family is to provide social support to its members. People often view the family as the last bastion of social support when support from anyone else cannot be found during times of stress. The beneficial effects of social support have been conclusively established over decades of scientific research. The availability of social support significantly enhances people's general well-being and happiness in addition to their ability to withstand a variety of major stressors such as serious illness (Coyne & Smith, 1994). On the other hand, people who lack available social support appear to be at risk for developing a range of physical and mental health problems.

Social support is enacted through interpersonal communication and sometimes through instrumental behaviors. Its beneficial effects appear to result from several social-psychological processes. According to the *buffering model* (Cohen & Willis, 1985) social support mitigates the ill effects of stress by reducing the appraised threat and reducing the stress response that typically follows physical or psychological threat. Supportive communication allows people to work through their emotional reactions to stressful events, and to develop relief-generating reappraisals that alleviate or minimize stress (Albrecht, Burlison, & Goldsmith, 1994; Burlison & Goldsmith, 1998). The *main effect model* holds that involvement in caring relationships provides a generalized source of positive affect, self-worth, and belonging that keeps psychological despair at a minimum (Cohen, Gottlieb, & Underwood, 2000). The family is a particularly likely source of such caring relationships.

In the family context most acts of social support could be classified into one of three general categories (Wills et al., 1996). *Emotional support* is the availability of a family member with whom one can discuss problems, concerns, and feelings. Ordinarily, a provider of emotional support is a good listener who is not critical, blaming, or judgmental. Sometimes a family member who provides emotional support need not do anything more than listen and be available. *Instrumental support* is offered when a family member provides assistance with various tasks. In the family, this might mean help with household chores, a ride to school, or assistance with auto repairs. When family members provide *informational support* they give guidance, feedback, and resource information that is helpful in addressing a problem. Parents are often providers of informational support to their children. So for example, when a child attends his or her first formal high school dance, parents may offer suggestions on things like an appropriate suit or dress to wear, places to go out to dinner, and where to go to buy flowers. This kind of information can greatly reduce the stress of such an experience by helping to reduce uncertainty.

Social support from the family has a number of beneficial effects for maintaining well-being in the face of a variety of stressors and life circumstances. For instance, social support from the family is negatively related to substance abuse in adolescents (Wills, 1990; Wills et al., 1996).

Among adults, family social support is positively associated with life satisfaction, health, and positive mood (Walen & Lachman, 2000). Family social support is also positively associated with intentions to behave in less risky ways among HIV-positive gay men (Kimberly & Serovich, 1999). For young adults with an alcoholic parent, family social support was significantly associated with increased self-esteem (Menees, 1997). Family social support has proven to be a more powerful predictor of happiness over time than family income is (North, Holahan, Moos, & Cronkite, 2008). North and her colleagues measured family social support as the extent to which family members are helpful and supportive of each other, the extent to which they encourage each other to openly share their feelings, and the extent to which they can keep angry and conflict-laden interactions to reasonable levels. They found that positive changes in this type of social support in the family predicted increased happiness over time, whereas increased income did not.

Just as the presence of family social support can enhance well-being and buffer against the negative effects of stress, the lack of supportive relationships in the family can be detrimental to well-being. Children who do not receive very much social support from their families are more harmful to others, uncooperative, withdrawn, and exhibit higher levels of hopelessness (Kashani, Canfield, Borduin, Soltys, & Reid, 1994). Among high school students, low levels of social support from the family are associated with a substantial increase in alcohol use (Hamdan-Monsour, Puskar, & Sereika, 2007).

There can be no question that social support from the family can have a number of beneficial effects for family members. But what are the mechanisms that produce these positive effects? Family researchers believe that there are numerous pathways between family social support and positive outcomes (Wills, 1990). One basic function of social support is to *reduce negative affect*. When people are aware of the availability of social support from their family, they may worry less about problems and perceive them as more manageable. When people do become sad or anxious, readily available social support from family members can help to minimize these feelings. Also, family social support may *promote health-protective behaviors*. Wills suggests that family networks aid people in both recognizing symptoms and seeking medical attention when illness is suspected. One common explanation for why married men are generally healthier than unmarried men is because their wives point out their symptoms of illness and urge them to seek medical attention. Conversely, people with little social support available are more likely to be involved in health-damaging behaviors such as smoking, alcohol, or drug use. Additionally, family social support can *promote positive affect*. As we mentioned earlier, the main effect model for social support holds that family social support causes us to feel valued and cared for. This promotes a positive emotional state, feelings of belonging to a group or community, and feeling appreciated by others. Family social support may be associated with leisure experiences, enjoyment of shared activities, and help with instrumental tasks, all of which promote a positive mood in the recipients of the social support.

CONCLUSION

We began this chapter by examining different ways of classifying family stressors. Clearly “family stress” is not a generic phenomenon. Issues such as whether the stressor is normative versus unpredictable, temporary versus permanent, or voluntary versus involuntary can have a substantial effect on the extent to which the family experiences stress as result of exposure to various stressors. Family scientists have developed a number of theoretical models to explain how families experience and respond to stress. These include the ABC-X and Double ABC-X models, along with the systems and vulnerability–stress–adaptation models. Although each of these models differs in the components and mechanisms that are specified to explain family stress, each is useful for understanding how family communication influences and is influenced by stress. For example, in the ABC-X model, family communication could certainly be thought

of as a resource. In Patterson's FARR model, which is about balancing demands and capabilities, effective family communication is a useful resource that can aid the family's adaptation to stress. In Olson's systems model, communication is the mechanism that allows family to alter their adaptability and cohesion to appropriately respond to the stressor. Finally, in Karney and Bradbury's Vulnerability–Stress–Adaptation model, marital communication could be an enduring vulnerability as well as an adaptive process. In all models, there is a possibility that family communication itself could be the stressor or at least generate stressors. Coping involves the strategies that families use to deal with stressors. Like stressors themselves, coping strategies are diverse ranging from functional to dysfunctional and individual to communal. Many involve specific types of communication and messages exchanged among family members in order to address the stressor. Finally, we discussed social support as a fundamental and important type of family communication that is vital for responding to stressful events.

There are few family processes as consequential as the family's means and mechanisms for dealing with stress. All families will experience stress. Some families respond to stress in ways that make them a stronger and more competent social structure. However, stress literally defeats and destroys other families. What differentiates those families that grow from those that fall apart in the face of stress is the nature of the family's communication, coping tactics, and their predisposition to attack problems instead of each other.

Later, in chapters 14 and 15, we will revisit the vital role of supportive communication in the family as it relates to physical and mental health problems. More immediately, the next three chapters of this book examine in more detail various family stressors such as divorce and forming stepfamilies. Many of the concepts and mechanisms outlined in the models of family stress that were presented in this chapter will be useful for understanding how families experience and respond to these various stressors.

11 Normative and Nonnormative Family Stressors

All families experience stress from time to time. Stressors may cause the family to increase their interactions with each other in order to cope with the event and to reorganize their relationships. In some cases, stressors pull family members away from each other physically and/or psychologically, thus decreasing their interactions. In either case, family stressors are a powerful force in shaping family communication and relationships. As discussed in chapter 10, family stressors can be roughly organized into those that are normative, or predictable, versus those that are nonnormative, or unpredictable. Earlier we noted that this distinction is somewhat imperfect as certain “nonnormative” family stressors such as divorce are fairly common and predictable, whereas other “normative” family stressors such as raising and launching children do not happen in every family. Nevertheless, this distinction is prominent in the family science literature and provides a useful framework for organizing and understanding the unique aspects of different family stressors.

In this chapter we review several normative and nonnormative family stressors. In so doing, we will attempt to answer questions such as “What are the major stressors that families experience?” “What are some of the factors that lead up to or follow these stressors?” and “What is the role of communication in the experience of different family stressors?” This analysis will show that family stressors each have their own unique qualities and challenges. At the same time, some phenomena are common to most family stressors. For example, most family stressors cause a shift in roles and interactions within the family. Additionally, the family’s functioning before the stressor is usually the best predictor of their functioning during and after the stressor. Stressors amplify problems that are already present in troubled families. Families that function well during times of relative harmony usually weather stressors better than families that have a great deal of conflict and contention. We start this chapter with an analysis of normative family stressors that are associated with the family life cycle. This is followed by an examination of several nonnormative, but still fairly common, family stressors.

NORMATIVE FAMILY STRESSORS

Normative, or predictable, family stressors can be thought of as stages in the life cycle of the family. All families progress through various stages of development, and the transitions through these various stages are often times of great stress for family members (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999; McGoldrick, Heiman, & Carter, 1993). This is known as the “critical-transition hypothesis” (Aldous, 1990). When families undergo critical transitions, they are hypothesized to experience stress and changes in family interaction patterns. Carter and McGoldrick (1999) developed an influential taxonomy of family life cycle stages. Their model begins with single young adults leaving home, and progresses to the transition to marriage, families with young children, families with adolescent children, launching children and moving on, and

Table 11.1 Carter and McGoldrick's Stages of the Family Life Cycle with associated social/relational tasks

| <i>Family Life Cycle Stage</i> | <i>Primary Social/Relational Tasks</i> |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaving Home: Single Young Adults | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - redefine relationships with parents to be less dependent - develop intimate peer relationships - establish self-identity |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Joining of Families Through Marriage: The New Couple | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - negotiate and accommodate expectations for marriage - recalibrate idealized feelings toward partner while maintaining relational satisfaction - negotiate and reconstruct social networks |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families With Young Children | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - adjust marriage to make space for child(ren) - childrearing and socialization - adjust relationships with grandparents |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families With Adolescents | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - adjust relationship with child to allow for more autonomy - manage increasing parent-child conflicts - refocus on middle-stage of the marriage - focus on care of elderly parents (grandparents) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launching Children and Moving On | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - adjust back to a marital dyad - develop adult relationships with grown children - expand the family supersystem to include in-laws - cope with death and disability of elderly family members |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families in Later Life | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - maintain couple interests in the face of physical decline - cope with death and disability of elderly family members - support younger and older generation - cope with the loss of spouse, siblings, and peers - negotiate relationships for assistance with self-care - review life goals and prepare for death |

Note: From Carter, B. & McGoldrick, M. (1999). *The Expanded Family Life Cycle*, (3rd ed.) Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon. Copyright © by Pearson Education. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

finally aging families in later life. In Table 11.1, we summarize the key social/relational tasks associated with each stage of the family life cycle. It is important to note that even though these stages of the family life cycle are referred to as “normative,” it may not actually be “normal” for a family to progress through each and every stage, or to progress through them in the order that they are presented in the table. As noted earlier, unpredictable family stressors like divorce and sudden death, as well as variations in family forms such as childless and remarried couples, can seriously interrupt or alter the family’s progression through these different stages.

In this section we consider four normative family stressors that represent transitions in stages through the family life cycle. Such stressors are often viewed as “developmental stressors” because they are part of the typical development of most families. These stressors include the transition to marriage, the effects of parenthood on marriage, launching children, and issues associated with the aging family. Each of these has a dramatic impact on the nature and structure of family relationships. Because there is a separate chapter in this book devoted to parent–child relationships (chapter 7), we focus in this section on those stressors that have an impact on marriages and the greater family system. In chapter 7 we focus more exclusively on some of the issues and problems associated with parenting such as relations between parents and their adolescent children.

The Transition to Marriage

Marriage is a somewhat paradoxical transition in the family life cycle. On one hand, it represents a departure from the family of origin. On the other hand, it represents a merger of

two family systems into a larger, more complex supersystem. Not only does marriage create a spousal relationship, but it also creates an extensive set of relationships with in-laws, and in some cases creates an “empty-nest” situation in the family of origin. The changing landscape of the family of origin relationships and the development of a new family of orientation requires substantial adjustment for all family members involved. Despite the fact that marriage is a time of celebration and joy in most families, it also presents a series of tasks that can be experienced as stressful.

One of the fundamental challenges faced by couples making the transition to marriage is discussion and reconciliation of differing expectations and intentions for their marriage. People approach marriage with expectations that have been shaped by their families of origin, their friendship networks, and the media (Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Segrin & Nabi, 2002; Starrels & Holm, 2000; Surra, 1988). One of the first challenges faced by engaged couples is the negotiation and accommodation of each other’s intentions for the marriage. This is essentially the creation of a shared couple identity. Communication tasks range from the mundane (e.g., what color towels should we buy?) to the profound (e.g., should we have children?). Most people enter into marriage with at least a rough idea of where they stand on the more profound issues. Negotiating these expectations between partners is vital to the success of the marriage. Refusal to discuss expectations offers no escape from their consequences. Eventually partners will have to make choices about jobs, children, relations with extended family members, houses to buy, leisure pursuits, etc. that will inevitably bring potentially competing expectations into sharp focus.

Holding high expectations for marriage can be beneficial for couples with good marital communication skills, but detrimental to those without such skills (McNulty & Karney, 2004). High marital expectations are associated with increases in satisfaction over the first four years of marriage for couples who exhibit a lot of positive communication behaviors during problem solving conversations (i.e., staying on topic, moving the problem toward resolution, avoiding criticism, rejection, or assigning fault to the partner). In contrast, high expectations are associated with decreases in marital satisfaction for those couples who lack these constructive problem solving skills. McNulty and Karney suggested that “When the relationship context is positive, positive expectations appear to be adaptive. When the relationship context is less positive, less positive expectations appear to be adaptive” (p. 738).

Another major task for the couple making the transition to marriage involves the negotiation and reconstruction of changing social networks (Lederer & Lewis, 1991). As couples progress toward marriage, interactions with friendship networks, especially more superficial contacts, diminish. Marrying couples also inherit each other’s social networks and must be able to find their place within those networks. One of the most obvious examples of this involves relationships with extended family members. There are several potential problems here that can create stress for the newlywed couple (McGoldrick, 1988). One problematic pattern occurs when a spouse (or both spouses) is strongly enmeshed in his or her family of origin and continues that pattern after marriage. This can create feelings of guilt, intrusiveness, and unclear boundaries that interfere with the couple’s ability to establish their own unique identity. A second problematic pattern occurs when a spouse marries to gain “independence” and completely cuts off communication with his or her family of origin. The irony is that failing to resolve contentious issues through open communication ensures that the spouse will remain emotionally bound to his or her family of origin through powerful feelings of anger and resentment instead of being truly independent (McGoldrick et al., 1993). Finally, some couples maintain a pattern of interactions with extended family that involves some closeness, some conflict, and avoidance of certain issues. This very common pattern may be functional at times, but also causes underlying tensions to surface at times of transition in the family (e.g., weddings, funerals, major illness, children leaving home). Couples can become ensnared in these matters, and the extended family’s issues can spill over into and affect their marriage.

Despite the fact that newlywed couples are remarkably satisfied with their marriages, some evidence for the stressfulness of this transition is evident in studies that measure spouses' love for each other during this time of transition. To illustrate, Tucker and Aron (1993) measured partners' passionate love (intense longing for union with the partner) about 2 months prior to and 8 months after marriage. Surprisingly, they found small *decreases* in passionate love over this transition. Related findings indicate that during the first two years of the marriage couples' love for each other decreases and their conflicts increase (Huston & Houts, 1998). It should be noted that this decrease in spouses' love for each other over the transition to marriage was not dramatic, yet it does appear to be a reliable phenomenon that is perhaps reflective of the stress associated with adjusting to this new role. Also, there is considerable variability in how much love declines over the newlywed years, and it is the slope of that decline (i.e., how far and how fast it drops) that is predictive of subsequent marital dissolution (Huston, Caughlin et al., 2001). These findings indicate that another important task associated with the transition to marriage is a sort of emotional recalibration of the intense, and perhaps idealized, feelings toward the partner that existed during courtship.

Effects of Parenthood on Marriage

The transition to parenthood is one of the most dramatic changes to occur in the course of a marriage. Although this transition is not experienced in all marriages, about 90% of all married couples have children and must therefore make the necessary adjustments to accommodate a significant shift in the social structure of their lives. Prior to the birth of children, a married couple is a family composed of one dyad. However, the birth of a single child dramatically increases the complexity of family relationships. Now there are three different dyads and a family triad. Of course, the birth of additional children increases family relational complexities exponentially. Despite the fact that there are strong parentalist pressures in our society and a great deal of positive cultural folklore associated with having children, it is apparent that children introduce stressors into the lives of parents that have a considerable impact on the landscape of their marriage. Psychologists John Gottman and Clifford Notarius (2002) concluded that "After 15 longitudinal studies, it is now generally accepted that the transition to parenthood is a stressful period for marriage" (p. 172). In the sections below we explain some of the reasons for this stress.

Changes in Marital Satisfaction

The most commonly studied effect of the transition to parenthood is a change in marital satisfaction. Numerous early studies showed that marital satisfaction declines as the first child is born. Researchers generally arrived at this conclusion through one of two methods. First, studies that compared married couples with children to childless married couples generally indicated that those with children had lower marital satisfaction. Second, studies that followed couples during the early years of their marriage, through pregnancy and birth of the first child, also revealed that marital satisfaction decreased in conjunction with parenthood. Unfortunately, the conclusions that can be drawn from such studies are limited for several reasons. Studies that compare couples with and without children often confound marital duration with the presence of children (Belsky, 1990; Huston & Vangelisti, 1995). Because most married couples have children relatively early in the course of their marriage, childless couples are likely to be those who have only been married for a short period of time. When compared to a sample of married couples with children, who have usually been married for a longer period of time, differences in marital satisfaction may be due to the different durations of their marriages. Most couples experience decreases in their marital satisfaction over the first 10 years of their marriage, irrespective of the presence of children (Kurdek, 1993; Lindahl, Clements, & Markman, 1998). A similar problem applies to studies that follow young couples through the birth of their

first child. If marital satisfaction reliably decreases for most married couples over the first 10 years of their marriage, decreasing satisfaction after a child is born cannot necessarily be attributed to the presence of the child. It could just be the result of time. What is needed is a control group of childless couples for comparison who are followed over a similar period of time.

For some time there was disagreement in the scientific community about whether the birth of the first child is meaningfully associated with decreases in marital satisfaction (Clements & Markman, 1996). Several researchers presented data from sophisticated studies to suggest that marital satisfaction stays relatively stable over the transition to parenthood (Huston & Vangelisti, 1995; Kurdek, 1993; Lindahl et al., 1998). Nevertheless, other equally sophisticated studies still indicate that the transition to parenthood is marked by declining marital satisfaction for the mother and father (Feeney, Noller, & Ward, 1997; Hackel & Ruble, 1992; Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrère, 2000). For example, Hackel and Ruble (1992) very cleverly followed couples from pregnancy to postpartum and compared them to a group who were childless but still intending to have children at a future date. This essentially equates the two groups on their ultimate desires for children. After the first child was born, couples reported lower marital satisfaction, and this was not simply due to the passage of time. Hackel and Ruble (1992) also asked couples to list the three most positive aspects of their current experience. Prior to pregnancy 85% listed their marriage as one of the most positive elements in their lives. During pregnancy, this figure dropped to 50%, and postpartum, only 33% of the men and 16% of the women listed their marriage as one of the three most positive aspects of their lives. Shapiro et al. (2000) followed newlywed couples for the first six years of their marriage. During that time, a little over one third of the couples became parents. The marital satisfaction scores of the wives who became mothers declined on average 10.63 points per year during the study. On the other hand, marital satisfaction of the wives who remained childless declined an average of 1.12 points per year (Shapiro et al.).

Longitudinal studies, some of which include a voluntarily childless control group, continue to appear in the research literature, supporting the conclusion that parenthood hastens the decline of marital satisfaction in early marriage (Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009; Lawrence, Rothman, Cobb, Rothman, & Bradbury, 2008). This research shows that, in general, the marital satisfaction of both parents and nonparents declines over the first six years of their marriage, but this decline is much more dramatic for those who became parents.

Even though the stress of new parenthood appears to take a toll on the marital satisfaction of most couples, some couples experience this transition without a down turn in marital satisfaction. Shapiro et al. (2000) found that 33% of the wives who became mothers experienced an *increase* in marital satisfaction with the transition to parenthood. Doss et al. (2009) found that 7% of mothers and 15% of fathers experienced gains in marital satisfaction with the transition to parenthood. It is now clear that not all couples experience decreases in marital satisfaction as a result of parenthood. Consequently, scientific attention is being directed toward explaining why marital happiness declines, or in some cases improves, as some husbands and wives become fathers and mothers.

Traditionalization of Gender Roles

One of the most striking marital changes accompanying parenthood is a shift to a more traditional division of labor where the wife takes care of the interior household chores and childrearing and the husband takes care of exterior household chores and finances (Belsky, 1990; Huston & Vangelisti, 1995; MacDermid, Huston, & McHale, 1990). The traditionalization of gender roles may suit some couples rather well, especially those with traditional ideologies (MacDermid et al., 1990). On the other hand, wives who are low in stereotypically feminine traits are at high risk for decreasing marital satisfaction when roles become traditionalized with the transition to parenthood (Belsky, Lang, & Huston, 1986). Unfortunately, as many wives

approach motherhood they expect that the division of household labor will become more egalitarian after the child is born. Often, the exact opposite happens, with husbands actually doing a smaller percentage of household work after the child is born (e.g., MacDermid et al., 1990; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003). The violation of these expectations has been identified as a key ingredient in the declines of wives' postpartum marital satisfaction (Cowan, Cowan, Heming, & Miller, 1991; Hackel & Ruble, 1992; Ruble, Fleming, Hackel, & Stangor, 1988). As husbands cut back on their contributions to household tasks, many wives perceive unfairness in the relationship, which in turn leads to increased marital conflict and distress (Grote & Clark, 2001; Ruble et al., 1988).

Planning and Timing

The stress of transition to parenthood is closely tied to the timing and planning of pregnancy. Most marriages fare best when the husband and wife have a period of time to adjust to their new roles without the added burden of parenthood. Early first birth couples, defined as those who have a child when the wife is age 24 or younger, experience more dramatic declines in marital satisfaction with the transition to parenthood compared to those couples who delay childbirth for a greater period of time (Helms-Erikson, 2001; see also Kurdek, 1998b). In general, the longer a couple is married before having a child, the happier they are with their marriage (Helms-Erikson, 2001). In addition to timing, planning plays a vital role in the maintenance of marital satisfaction over the transition to parenthood. The most stressful life events are often the ones that happen unexpectedly. About 50% of all pregnancies in the general population are unplanned (Henshaw, 1998). Couples who experienced unplanned pregnancies exhibited greater decreases in marital satisfaction than those whose pregnancies were planned (Cox, Paley, Burchial, & Payne, 1999; Snowden, Schott, Awalt, & Gillis-Knox, 1988), and this appears especially true for husbands/fathers (Lawrence et al., 2008). Couples who delay childbirth and who plan the birth of their first child clearly have more time to contemplate and adjust to their new roles as parents. This undoubtedly contributes to their ability to maintain a happy marriage as they transition to parenthood.

The Changing Nature of Marital Interactions

Children and spouses compete for the finite resources of each other's time and energy. The birth of the first child is often accompanied by significant changes in the nature of spouses' interactions. Expressions of positive affection decline, conflicts increase, spouses spend less time together as a dyad, they communicate less with each other, and focus a greater proportion of their interactions on the child (Belsky, 1990; Huston & Vangelisti, 1995; Kurdek, 1993). The amount of time that couples have available for leisure time significantly decreases with parenthood, and what leisure activities the couple is able to engage in are generally centered around the child (MacDermid et al., 1990).

Even though the nature of marital interactions changes substantially with the birth of the first child, the maintenance of certain interaction patterns may have a prophylactic effect to ward off the declines in satisfaction that characterize the marriages of many first time parents. For instance, husbands and wives who exhibit good problem-solving communication prenatally, experience greater marital satisfaction before the child is born and experience a smaller decline in satisfaction after the child is born, relative to those couples with poor problem-solving communication skills (Cox et al., 1999). Also, wives' marital satisfaction can be sustained and perhaps even increased over the transition to parenthood when husbands express high awareness of their wives while talking about their relationship, and when they express fondness and affection toward their wives (Shapiro et al., 2000). On the other hand, wives' satisfaction decreases when husbands express disappointment in the marriage and negativity (Shapiro et al., 2000).

A major culprit in declining marital satisfaction over the transition to parenthood is conflict. The transition to parenthood is reliably associated with increases in conflict between new parents (Bouchard, Boudreau, & Hebert, 2006). Doss et al. (2009) found that negativity during problem solving interactions, conflict, and problem intensity increased in couples followed for eight years through the transition to parenthood. However, this escalation of negativity and conflict was not evident among a control group of childless married couples followed over the same duration of their marriage. The association between conflict over childrearing and decreasing marital satisfaction is still evident in parents of adolescent children (Cui & Donnellan, 2009). Children give parents a whole new set of issues to argue about, and the stressful side effects of parenthood such as sleep deprivation, physical exhaustion, lack of free time, and increased financial burdens can stress marriages and fuel intense conflicts. In many cases, patterns of maladaptive conflict are already evident during pregnancy and the transition to parenthood appears to intensify these communication problems and their consequences (Doss et al., 2009; Kluwer & Johnson, 2007; Paley et al., 2005).

Launching Children

Popular literature and cultural folklore each suggest that launching children is stressful for family members. Perhaps this is why the term “empty nest syndrome” is often used to refer to this stage of the family life cycle. Some people have observed that parents, especially mothers, experience depression and emptiness after their children leave home. Some also believe that this is a time of heightened conflict between spouses who may have kept their differences concealed while the children were living at home. Despite the fact that there are a number of significant challenges and tasks associated with this transition, scientific research indicates that there are many positive aspects of this stage in the family life cycle.

Children Leaving Home

The most common reasons why children move out of their parents' home are: school, marriage/cohabitation, a desire for independence, military duty, and employment (Ward & Spitze, 1996). There is some evidence that family of origin structure is systematically related to the motivation to leave home (Mitchell, 1994). In a large study of children aged 15 to 24, Mitchell found that those living in stepfamilies were 5 to 6 times more likely to leave home, compared to those living with both parents or a single parent (see also Cooney & Mortimer, 1999). At the same time, those living in a stepfamily or in lone parent households were particularly prone to leaving home in order to get away from conflict and establish independence. Regardless of the particular motivation for leaving home, this transition demands significant changes in the adult child's repertoire of behaviors. Tasks that were previously taken care of by parents, some of which may have been outside the child's awareness, must now be assumed by the child him- or herself. Although many children are eager to leave their parents' home, there is undoubtedly a degree of stress associated with all of the new responsibilities that must be assumed. One of the fundamental family interaction tasks facing the child is the recalibration of his or her relationship with the parents. Most children welcome the autonomy from their parents, but at the same time desire to maintain a reasonable degree of contact and closeness with them. Too much reliance on parents after moving out may threaten their sense of independence and accomplishment, whereas too little may leave them feeling abruptly disconnected. Thus, this is a time when children have to recalibrate relationships with their parents to achieve a new level of balance between autonomy and connectedness.

Parents of Children Leaving Home

Does the departure of children represent a crisis for parents? Is there really such a thing as the “empty nest syndrome” as portrayed in the popular press? For the most part, launching

children is associated with positive outcomes for parents. Over the transition to the “empty nest” stage, mothers report increases in positive mood and general well-being, and decreases in negative mood and daily hassles (Dennerstein, Dudley, & Guthrie, 2002). For most parents, the departure of adult children may mean a new sense of freedom, diminished responsibility, increased privacy (Barber, 1989), and pride in seeing adult children establish their own identity and role, especially in cases where children leave for school, military, or employment. Whatever remorse is associated with the departure is evidently outweighed by these sources of happiness.

Like their emerging adult children, parents face their own set of social tasks during this phase of the family life cycle. Just as children must recalibrate relationships with parents at this stage, so too must parents realign relationships with their adult children. Again the task is to find a balance between autonomy and connection that is comfortable not just for the parent, but for the *relationship*. Many parent–child relationships struggle with this balancing act for years after the child has physically left the home. In addition to recalibrating parent–adult child relationships at this stage, parents also face the tasks of situating themselves in an expanding family structure and resolving relationships with their aging parents (McCullough & Rutenberg, 1988). As parents launch their children, marriages, in-laws, and grandchildren are often just around the corner. This means that parents will find themselves in an expanding set of family relationships that may at times compete for attention from their adult children. Once children are launched, it would be understandable for parents to focus their attention on relationships with their aging parents. McCullough and Rutenberg (1988) argue that a healthy relationship between the older two generations is vital for the successful launching of young adult children. Middle-aged parents who are either emotionally cut off from their own parents or overinvolved with them are anticipated to have problematic responses to the departure of their young adult children.

Parent–Child Relationships

According to role identity theory, people develop a sense of meaning and purpose in life from the roles that they identify with and enact (Thoits, 1983). For parents who are heavily invested in their role and who derive considerable satisfaction from being a parent, it is reasonable to think that the departure of children might be associated with declines in general well-being and mood. However, most currently available evidence suggests that this is a happy time for parents. Perhaps one reason for this, consistent with role identity theory, is that parents essentially continue being parents long after their children have left the home. Most studies show that despite their physical absence, parents and children still stay in close touch with each other (White & Edwards, 1990). Frequent visits, letters, and phone calls are common among adult children and their parents, and allow them to maintain what are generally characterized as close relationships after launching (Lye, 1996). Lye found that adult children and parents commonly exchanged emotional support and advice, with the one exception being divorced fathers and their adult children. In essence, the arrangement struck between many young adult children and their parents represents a win–win situation: The children acquire their long sought independence and the parents appear able to still derive satisfaction and enjoyment from their role as parents, with fewer constraints and responsibilities associated with the newly adjusted role. In many cases this actually improves the parent–child relationship. Barber (1989) explains that as children move out on their own, they often develop a newfound appreciation for their parents and are less critical of them. As young adults tackle the challenges faced by establishing independence, many gain a perspective that may cast their parents in a new light that is much easier to appreciate.

Young adults’ decision to move out of the home has often been explained by social exchange theory (see chapter 2). Children are assumed to weigh the costs and benefits of staying versus leaving the home. According to social exchange theory, they would be expected to choose the

living arrangement that yields the most valued benefits. However, as sociologist Lynn White notes, this perspective could be equally applied to parents' roles in launching their children (White, 1994a). There is no reason to assume that this transition is initiated purely by children. White observes that well-to-do parents might exchange their own resources to subsidize their children's departure in order to gain privacy and freedom of their own. This might be achieved for example by paying a child's rent for an apartment or housing bill for a college residence hall.

"Empty Nest" Marriages

After children leave home, the marital relationship between the parents regains prominence (McCullough & Rutenberg, 1988). Because many parents are in their mid-40s when they launch their children, it is reasonable to assume that they will live together as a couple without children in the home for 30 years. Parents who were previously consumed with childrearing responsibilities now have the opportunity to refocus their attention to their spouse and their marriage.

For the most part, middle-aged parents' marital satisfaction appears to increase somewhat when their grown children leave the home (Barber, 1989; White & Edwards, 1990). In some cases, there may be little change in feelings between the spouses immediately after their children leave home (e.g., Dennerstein et al., 2002), but for the majority of marriages, the newfound freedom and lessened financial responsibilities associated with this stage of the family life cycle appear to spill over into greater marital happiness. One of the major reasons for the upturn in marital satisfaction associated at the launching children stage is the greater enjoyment of time that spouses spend with each other (Gorchoff, Johm, & Helson, 2008). With that said, we should note that there is a particular subset in the population of married couples who appear to be headed for trouble when their children leave home. The usual scenario for these couples involves troubles in their relationship that predate the launching of their children (Pryor, 1999). These might include low cohesion, conflict, and boundary confusion. However, they hang on to their marriages, perhaps out of a felt obligation to the children. Then, when the children leave home and the couple realizes that there is nothing left of their marriage, they split up. The hallmark of such marriages is early childrearing (Heidemann, Suhomlinova, & O'Rand, 1998).

Heidemann and her associates carefully studied a nationally representative sample of over 5000 women and found that those who entered the empty nest phase early in their marital career were far more likely to divorce after their children left home, in contrast to those who entered the empty nest phase later in their marital career. To illustrate, a couple who has been married for 20 years at the onset of the empty nest has a nearly 300% increase in the risk of divorce compared to the risk for marriages in general. On the other hand, those who have been married for 35 years when they reach the empty nest stage experience a 40% *decrease* in the risk of divorce when their last child leaves home (Heidemann et al., 1998). One obvious difference between couples that experience the empty nest stage 20 as opposed to 35 years into their marriage is that the former group clearly did not delay childbearing. In other words, those couples never had the opportunity to establish a solid foundation as a married couple, before the strains of parenting fell upon them. However, couples who spent some time together as husband and wife, before they became mom and dad, seem to experience more positive marital outcomes as their children leave home. Of course, another plausible explanation is that those who entered the empty nest state later in their marriage are also older, and thus have fewer attractive alternatives available to them. In either event, we should note that the phenomenon of divorce during the empty nest stage accounts for only about 10% of all divorces. Most couples who are going to divorce do so well before their last child leaves home, and most marriages that survive the childrearing years are happy and bound for perhaps even more happiness as the children leave home.

The Aging Family

As family members grow older, they face several challenges that are particular to this stage of the family life cycle. Among these are retirement, changing health, caregiving by the middle-aged generation, and relationship loss (Mancini & Blieszner, 1994; Walsh, 1988). This stage of the family life cycle is associated with dramatic changes in both family structure and family roles. Family members who were once care providers often become recipients of care. Declining health of some family members means their roles in the family have to be redefined. The death of family members often requires others to “step up to the plate” and assume new roles, regardless of their enthusiasm for doing so. In this section we will briefly discuss the impact of retirement, changing health and caregiving, and relationship loss on the aging family. For further analysis of this stage of the family life cycle, readers are referred to the section on grandparent relationships in chapter 9 and to chapter 15 where we analyze family interaction and physical health.

Retirement

One of the hallmark signs of the aging family is retirement. This is a pivotal transition in life about which people can feel extremely ambivalent. On one hand, retirement represents freedom from the demands, responsibilities, and routines of employment. Many families look forward to the retirement years as times when they can go on long vacations together, spend time with each other, and visit friends and extended family members. At the same time, retirement can represent a profound loss of a valued role, particularly for people whose role identity is closely tied to the work that they do (Walsh, 1988). Retirement also affects the way that a family structures its time. The retiree will now be spending at least twice as much time in the home as before. The spouse of the retiree may have to alter his or her normal routine to accommodate this change (Mancini & Blieszner, 1994). This could be a source of happiness or stress. Retirement tends to be least satisfying when the retiree’s spouse remains employed, thus strengthening that spouse’s power base and influence in the relationship (Szinovacz & Davey, 2005).

Older married couples can still have their disagreements too. Common marital problems among couples married for 40 years or more include how to spend leisure time, financial/spending habits, discipline and support of grandchildren, moving into a new home, and each other’s personality (Henry, Miller, & Giarrusso, 2005). It is reasonable to assume that at least some of these areas of marital conflict may have existed prior to old age as most evidence suggests that aging married couples maintain previously established interaction patterns in their relationship, including the division of labor (Mares, 1995).

Changing Health and Caregiving

One of the inevitable aspects of aging is a change in physical abilities and health. Many elderly people are able to effectively accommodate these changes without requiring much assistance. However, these changes often mean that the elderly family member may need to rely on others for certain things (e.g., going to the grocery store, preparing meals, housekeeping, etc.). Walsh (1988) notes that only about 5% of the elderly need such intense care as to require institutionalization, but that eventually as many as 85% will require some family caregiving for their daily functioning. Some researchers have cleverly demonstrated that modern communication technologies such as videophones and email dramatically help to maintain family relationships (especially with grandchildren and great-grandchildren) and quality of life for institutionalized elderly people (Lansdale, 2002; Mickus & Luz, 2002). When the assistance of family members is needed there is a fairly reliable pattern, with spouses being most likely to provide care, followed by adult children, and then siblings (Davey, 2000). Whereas some have argued that

grandchildren may be involved in caregiving to aging family members (Willams & Nussbaum, 2001), others have concluded that this is rarely the case (Johnson, 1988). Like so many other normative family stressors, the family's adjustment to caring for its elderly members is associated with the quality of the past relationship between the caregiver and care recipient (Davey, 2000). When such family members have a history of positive interactions, the caregiving experience appears less stressful for all parties involved. But if there was a pattern of strained relationships prior to the elderly person's need for care, there is more stress and perceived burden by family members.

Relationship Loss

Invariably, aging family members will face relationship loss. The most stressful form of relationship loss involves the death of a spouse. Because women have a longer life expectancy than men, about 75% of the time this means that a woman loses her husband and must adjust to widowhood. One of the best predictors of adjustment to loss of a spouse is the ability to plan for widowhood in advance (Mancini & Blieszner, 1994). People who have the opportunity to discuss widowhood with their spouses, family members, and other widows, before the spouse actually dies, seem to resolve their grief more successfully after the death (Hansson & Remondet, 1987). These findings illustrate just how important family communication is right up until the end of life. In fact, people who are widowed will often continue to think and have conversations about their deceased spouse at least once or twice a month for as long as 20 years (Carnelley, Wortman, Bolger, & Burke, 2006).

After the death of a spouse, the surviving family members can be an especially vital source of social support. Recent widows ordinarily receive more social support from their adult children than married parents of similar age (Ha, 2008). Because most women over the age of 50 do not remarry after the death of a spouse (Mares, 1995), remaining family relationships may take on a new importance, especially because widowhood increases parents' dependence on their children for financial and emotional support (Ha, Carr, Utz, & Nesse, 2006).

Murray (2000) described three primary factors that influence how well the family adjusts to the death of one of its members. The first factor is *timing and concurrent stressors in the family life cycle*. If the death is perceived as "on time" as opposed to "premature," family members are better able to adjust and work through their grief. However, if there are other stressors or transitions that are active at the same time (e.g., birth of a child, a young adult child moving out of the home), the family will have a more difficult time coping with the loss. Second, the *function and position of the person prior to his or her death* will have a big impact on the family's adjustment to the loss (Brown, 1988). For example, in a rigidly structured family that is built around a patriarch, the death of that individual can send shock waves through the family that will leave them permanently disorganized. Finally, *conflicted relationships with the deceased* can lead to complicated bereavement. Unresolved conflicts, bitter feelings, and estrangement can add to the lament over losing a family member, particularly as the surviving relative realizes that the opportunity for communication and resolution of these problems is no longer available.

NONNORMATIVE FAMILY STRESSORS

In this section we analyze the impact and function of several nonnormative family stressors. These stressors are sometimes called "unpredictable family stressors" because they are not part of the "normal" family life cycle. However, as we cautioned earlier, this is an imprecise classification as many of these stressors are in fact somewhat predictable and happen to so many families as to question their distinction as "nonnormative." In the pages that follow we discuss marital distress, separations from the family, and the struggle to balance work and family as

examples of nonnormative family stressors. Each of these has a massive impact on the form and function of family relationships. Each dramatically alters family interaction patterns, and in some cases, the stressor is actually caused by altered family interaction patterns. For discussions of additional nonnormative family stressors see chapter 12 (divorce) and chapter 15 (major illness).

Marital Distress

It is safe to say that virtually all marriages go through periods of distress. It is equally safe to say that communication is at the heart of most cases of marital distress. Fitzpatrick (1988b) observed that there are three sets of factors that predict marital distress: premarital factors (e.g., personality, values), social and economic factors, and interpersonal relationship factors. Among these, interpersonal relationship factors are the largest set. Marital communication patterns have proven to be key predictors of subsequent declines in marital satisfaction (Rogge & Bradbury, 1999a). Problems with communication seem to predispose couples to marital distress, and marital distress seems to damage the quality of husbands' and wives' communication with each other (Wright et al., 1994).

Prior to marriage, most of the problems and stressors that couples face are matters exterior to their relationship. These might involve negotiating relationships with each other's friends and parents, jealousy about relationships with other people, and initiating a career, for example. Upon getting married, couples face a new set of developmental challenges, reflecting matters that are largely interior to their relationship such as maintaining intimacy, communication problems, and shared time together (Storaasli & Markman, 1990). Many people are unprepared for the demands imposed by these challenges and consequently experience marital distress.

Marital Satisfaction Reliably Changes Over Time

One of the more reliable findings in family science is that married couples' satisfaction with their relationship decreases over the first 3–6 years of marriage (Johnson, Amoloza, & Booth, 1992; Karney, Bradbury, & Johnson, 1999; Kurdek, 1998b; Lindahl et al., 1998; Vangelisti & Huston, 1994). Two hypotheses for this are that the presence of children causes marital satisfaction to decline and that the "honeymoon" effect eventually wears off causing couples to see each other and their problems more realistically. The good news is that this level of satisfaction rebounds 15–20 years into the marriage after the children start leaving home and levels of marital conflict tend to simmer down somewhat (Whiteman, McHale, & Crouter, 2007). This pattern is part of the commonly held belief that over time marital satisfaction levels form a U-curve, with highest levels early, and then late, in the relationship. Vaillant and Vaillant (1993) challenged this assumption with findings from their 40-year study of Harvard graduates. They found that satisfaction levels were relatively stable over the different periods of measurement. However, this sample was exceptionally well-educated, virtually all White, and financially well off.

The U-curve pattern of marital satisfaction has also been challenged by findings from a 17-year study that documented slight decreases in marital satisfaction over time, with no eventual increase in more advanced marriages (Van Laningham, Johnson, & Amato, 2001). Van Laningham and her associates convincingly demonstrated that the upturn in marital satisfaction in later years that has been observed in many past studies is the result of a cohort effect (i.e., couples who have been married 20–30 years are couples who grew up in a different era with different values than couples who have only been together for 3 or 4 years). By implication, one would not expect to see an upswing in satisfaction 20–30 years from now among couples who are currently newlywed. The research findings from Vaillant and Vaillant (1993) are a reminder that not all people will experience higher degrees of distress

during the middle years of their marriage. About 30% of the husbands and 15% of the wives in one study showed *increases* in satisfaction during the early years of their marriages (Karney et al., 1999). And unfortunately, the Van Laningham et al. (2001) study indicates that not all couples should expect an increase in marital satisfaction in the later years of their marriage.

Marital Distress Is Strongly Associated with Negativity in Husband–Wife Interactions

When distressed married couples discuss important matters in their relationship, their communication is marked by disagreement, criticism, and guilt induction (Haefner, Notarius, & Pellegrini, 1991; Hooley & Hahlweg, 1989). These conversations are often the source of considerable negative affect, or emotion, for the distressed couples, and this is evident in their behaviors (Gottman & Notarius, 2002; Krokoff, Gottman, & Roy, 1988). It is not particularly surprising that distressed couples exhibit negativity during their interactions, and that these interactions are the source of a lot of negative emotions. Undoubtedly, the negative communication behaviors and negative emotions displayed in these interactions are causally related.

One pattern that distinguishes the interactions of distressed and nondistressed couples is not just the amount of negativity and negative affect, but rather the *reciprocity* of negative affect (Gottman & Levenson, 1986; Hooley & Hahlweg, 1989; Krokoff et al., 1988). When couples exhibit negative affect in their interactions, specific emotions such as anger, disgust, contempt, sadness, and fear are evident in their verbal and nonverbal behaviors. In distressed couples, the expression of these negative emotions seems to trigger similar expressions from the spouse. This is evident, for example, in a pattern called “cross-complaining” (Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1977). In cross-complaining, complaints are met with complaints. For example, if the husband said “you need to stop buying so many things with the credit card,” a cross-complaining response for his wife might be, “well why don’t you try to save some money instead of blowing it all on computer equipment?” In the first utterance, the husband complains to his wife, expressing his anger over her use of their credit card. In her response, she counters with an angry complaint of her own about his frivolous spending habits. In the conversations of distressed couples these cross-complaining loops are common. Needless to say, this is not a very fruitful approach to conflict resolution.

Is the expression of negative affect, and the tendency to reciprocate such expressions from a spouse, an antecedent or a consequent of marital distress? A number of researchers have attempted to address this issue by conducting longitudinal studies of positivity and negativity in marital interactions. Research findings suggest that negative affect in marital relationships is predictive of subsequent declines in satisfaction. For example, Kurdek (1998b) found that wives’ tendency to feel negative emotions when confronted with various problems predicted their, *and their husbands’*, declines in marital satisfaction over the following six years. A similar finding, but for the opposite sex, was found by Huston and Vangelisti (1991). In their study, newlywed husbands’ and wives’ negativity (e.g., acting bored or uninterested, showing anger or impatience, criticizing or complaining) predicted decreases in wives’ satisfaction over the ensuing two years. Husbands’ pessimism (e.g., expressing ambivalence about the future, a lack of commitment to working on the relationship) during a laboratory interview has proven to be predictive of declines in marital satisfaction two years later (Gee, Scott, Castellani, & Cordova, 2002). When couples were observed during a conflict resolution discussion, negativity (e.g., blame, accusation, criticism) by either spouse was predictive of decreases in wives’ satisfaction measured one year later (Gill, Christensen, & Fincham, 1999). On a more upbeat note, husbands’ and wives’ positivity (e.g., expressing understanding, acceptance) during that same conversation predicted *increases* in wives’ satisfaction one year later (see also Gee et al., 2002).

Flora and Segrin (2000) asked married couples to complete the following sentence “I wish you were more ...” and discuss their answers for 7 minutes. The more speaking turns each spouse took in this conversation, the more their satisfaction dropped in the following 6 months. Also, couples were asked to engage in a complimenting interaction where they completed the sentence “Of all the wonderful qualities you possess, the one that I appreciate the most is ...,” and discussed for 7 minutes. The more negative affect husbands reported in these supposedly “positive” interactions, the more their satisfaction declined over the subsequent six months. Watching these couples in the complimenting interaction, we were struck by how hard it was for some to complete the sentence. Being married to a spouse who finds it difficult to offer a compliment is disappointing and one potential source of negative affect.

Just as the presence of negativity in marital interactions warns of future declines in satisfaction, so too does negative affect reciprocity foreshadow troubles. Couples’ marital satisfaction has been shown to decrease over a 3 year period when wives reciprocated their husbands’ negative affect while discussing the “events of the day” (Levenson & Gottman, 1985). It is interesting that if a husband did *not* reciprocate his wife’s negative affect during the conversation, her satisfaction declined. Gottman and Levenson explain that this may be due to men wanting to vent and then be left alone, whereas women may want to have their negative feelings explicitly responded to by their partner.

Before we create the impression that negativity in marital interaction is all bad, it is important to note that the expression of negativity can be functional in at least some cases. In one notable investigation, the tendency for wives to respond to their husbands with disgust or anger was negatively associated with their current satisfaction (as expected) but *positively* associated with their satisfaction three years later (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). In other words, the more negativity wives communicated toward their husbands during a conflict resolution, the happier they were later on in the marriage, despite their unhappiness at the time that they expressed this negativity. Some have characterized this as a “confrontation effect,” noting that in the long run it may be better to confront the spouse with one’s own anger and frustration. As we noted earlier in this book, not all couples take the same approach to handling their conflicts. For couples that characteristically avoid conflict, the wife’s expression of disgust or contempt during a marital interaction predicted her current dissatisfaction with the marriage but her future improvements in satisfaction (Krokoff, 1991). However, for couples that were conflict-engagers, the expression of disgust and contempt had the effect of decreasing satisfaction over time. Thus it appears that conflict-avoiding wives can benefit from at least occasionally expressing anger to their husbands. Alternatively, conflict-engaging couples have to strike a precarious balance between openly expressing their grievances and maintaining happiness. For such couples, the expression of anger in marital interactions seems to be harmful to wives’ long term satisfaction.

The Demand Withdrawal Pattern Is Harmful to Marital Satisfaction

Demand–withdrawal is a pattern of marital interaction that has been repeatedly linked with distress and even divorce. In the demand–withdrawal pattern, one spouse (usually the wife) presents a complaint, demand, or criticism. The other spouse (usually the husband) responds by withdrawal and defensiveness (Christensen, 1988). Couples seeking a divorce or in marital therapy report more demand–withdrawal patterns in their interactions than happily married couples (Christensen & Shenk, 1991). This dysfunctional interaction pattern appears to reflect an unresolved discrepancy within the couple over desires for closeness versus distance. As might be expected, the tendency for either husbands or wives to be in the demand role is associated with their desire for change in their partner (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 1999). However, Caughlin and Vangelisti (1999) found that husbands’ desire for change was also associated with a *wife demand/husband withdrawal* pattern during a conversation that the couple had in their home. Wives’ desire for change was only associated with the predictable wife demand/husband

withdrawal pattern during the conversation. Caughlin and Vangelisti noted that in some cases, the desire for change might be over a couple-level issue that will occasionally put both spouses in the demanding role, with the attendant partner withdrawal.

Husbands and wives appear to have differing reactions to the demand–withdrawal pattern. In one study of newlyweds, partner *hostility* proved to be the strongest predictor of decreases in marital satisfaction at the third anniversary for wives, but partner *withdrawal* was the strongest predictor of declines in satisfaction for husbands (Roberts, 2000). Stereotypically, people think of the nagging wife and the withdrawn husband. However, it is when these roles are reversed that marital satisfaction is harmed the most. Wives' marital satisfaction is damaged far more by their husbands' hostility than their husbands' withdrawal. And while husbands' marital satisfaction also appears to be eroded by wives' hostility, their wives' withdrawal harms marital satisfaction even further (Roberts, 2000). Cross cultural research shows that the demand–withdrawal pattern is perhaps universally associated with marital distress, but culture-specific gender roles can often dictate which spouse is in the demanding and which is in the withdrawing role (Rehman & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2006). In more strongly patriarchal cultures, it is less common for wives to be in the demanding role. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the demand/withdrawal pattern might be a marker of marital dissatisfaction regardless of who is in the demand and who is in the withdrawal mode (Caughlin, 2002). Furthermore, in some established marriages, the demand/withdrawal pattern can lead to *increases* in wives' satisfaction in near future (Caughlin, 2002) (see chapter 6).

One reason why the demand–withdrawal pattern of marital interaction is associated with low marital quality is because it causes most conflicts to go unresolved. Couples characterized by high levels of demand–withdrawal report lower levels of conflict resolution, more negative conflict tactics such as threat, verbal hostility, and verbal aggression, and fewer constructive conflict management tactics such as problem solving, compromise, and expressing support or affection (Papp, Kouros, & Cummings, 2009). Because expressions of conflict may not even raise a response from the withdrawing partner, much less move toward resolution, spouses in such marriages tend to feel less understood by their partner than spouses in marriages with lower levels of demand–withdrawal (Weger, 2005).

As destructive as the demand/withdrawal pattern of marital interaction may be, there are communication behaviors that can counter its ill effects. Caughlin and Huston (2002) found that a demand/withdrawal pattern of interaction was negatively associated with both husbands' and wives' satisfaction, regardless of who was in the demand role and who was in the withdrawal role. However, when partners otherwise expressed a lot of affection toward each other (e.g., expressing approval, compliments, “I love you,” and showing physical affection outside of intercourse) the correlation between the demand/withdrawal pattern and marital satisfaction was near zero. Similarly, when husbands and wives frame their requests with “we” instead of “you,” such demands are not associated with partner withdrawal or lower marital satisfaction (Mitnick, Heyman, Malik, & Slep, 2009). When the demand/withdrawal pattern occurs in the context of a relationship that is otherwise characterized by messages that express positive regard and liking toward the partner, or with a relational rather than individual message focus, marital distress is minimized.

Perceptual Inaccuracy Leads to Marital Discord

Another hallmark sign of marital distress is a perceptual inaccuracy in which spouses negatively misevaluate their partners' messages such that they perceive messages as more negative than they are intended to be (Noller, 1984; see also chapter 6 for a discussion of perceptual inaccuracy). Ordinarily, this is studied in the lab by having couples interact while sitting at a “talk table.” The talk table is a device that allows couples to flip a toggle switch to determine who has the floor. It also has a series of buttons that each spouse can push to rate the positivity or negativity of the message that is currently being sent. Spouses who converse at a talk table

are instructed to rate the intent of their messages, and their partners are instructed to rate the impact of the messages. A preponderance of messages that are rated negatively by the speaker (intent) or listener (impact) is predictive of subsequent declines in marital satisfaction (Markman, 1981, 1984). Further, couples whose marital satisfaction erodes over the years are those who cannot agree on the intent and impact ratings (Markman, 1984). Markman views this as a sort of communication skills deficit, where the husband and wife are unable to send messages to each other in such a way that intent = impact. What is particularly interesting is that nondistressed wives may actually be happy because they *over* estimate their husbands' positive intents (Notarius et al., 1989).

Recent refinements on the intent = impact model of perceptual accuracy call into question whether this is truly a communication skills deficit. For many distressed couples messages are often sent with a genuinely negative intent, especially among wives (Denton, Burleson, & Sprenkle, 1994). Thus the problem may lie not so much in the mismatch of spouses' intents and perceived impacts, but with their motivation to send negatively valenced messages to their partner. Also, what might be more important for the marriage than absolute perceptual accuracy (i.e., message intent = message impact), is a *matching* of spouses' skill levels in producing and interpreting such messages (Burleson & Denton, 1992). Burleson and Denton found that married couples were happy so long as their communication skill levels were matched. In other words, a husband who had a hard time sending messages that were interpreted in accord with his intentions could be satisfied so long as his wife was equally poor in her communication. According to this matching hypothesis, the couples that are headed for marital distress are those in which the husband and wife are mismatched in their communication abilities.

Marital Distress is More Obvious in Nonverbal than in Verbal Communication

Sometimes what separates interpersonal success from interpersonal failure is not *what* is said, but *how* it is said. Distressed couples tend to misunderstand each other's nonverbal communication behaviors, and usually they are unaware of these misunderstandings (Noller, 1984). This may be due in part to the fact that distressed couples are more prone to send discrepant messages where the vocal or visual aspects of the message are positive but the words are negative (Noller, 1984). Obviously, these messages are difficult to interpret because they send contradictory signals.

It is often the case that a couple's nonverbal behaviors are more strongly associated with their distress than their verbal behaviors are (Hooley & Hahlweg, 1989). In an interesting test of this hypothesis, Vincent, Friedman, Nugent, and Messerly (1979) asked distressed and nondistressed married couples to have a neutral conversation and then to have a conversation in which they pretended to be "the most happy, blissful, and contented couple that they could imagine" (fake good) or "the most unhappy, conflicted, and distressed couple they could imagine" (fake bad). An analysis of their interactions showed that couples' verbal behaviors in the neutral and fake conditions were significantly different for both couples. In each case, they altered the nature of their discourse to be consistent with the instructions. However, their nonverbal behaviors were indistinguishable in the neutral versus fake conditions. The implications of these results are clear: Distressed couples can easily conceal their dissatisfaction with each other by altering their verbal behavior, but even when pretending to be happy, their nonverbal behavior gives them away. Marital distress is particularly evident in poor synchronization of nonverbal communication behaviors known as "immediacy" behaviors (Julien, Brault, Chartrand, & Begin, 2000). These are nonverbal signs of involvement and liking such as eye contact, forward lean, and a direct body orientation. After analyzing videotaped interactions of distressed and nondistressed couples, Gottman et al. (1977) concluded that "Nonverbal behavior thus discriminated distressed and nondistressed couples better than verbal behavior" (p. 469). Of course, this is not to say that marital distress is not evident in verbal behavior.

Rather, when couples are being observed, it is their nonverbal behavior that most likely reveals their distress.

Communication Behaviors that Predict Future Marital Distress are Evident Premaritally

Researchers who study couples before marriage and then again after marriage generally find that although marital satisfaction may change over time, couples' communication patterns are relatively stable (Kelley et al., 1985; Noller & Feeney, 1998; Noller, Feeney, Bonnell, & Callan, 1994; Prado & Markman, 1999). Many of the problematic communication behaviors reviewed earlier in this chapter such as negativity, criticism, conflict, and poor perceptual and sending skills can be identified before a couple even marries (Huston & Houts, 1998). These findings lead to an astonishing conclusion. *The communication behaviors that will ultimately lead to the demise of marriage are already in place before the husband and wife marry.* The fact of the matter is that "irreconcilable differences" that are commonly cited as a cause for divorce may well have been in place before the wedding day. According to Gottman and Markman's bank account model (reviewed in chapter 6), most couples start out with a positive balance that causes them to be content with their relationship. Even though negative behaviors, or "withdrawals," may be evident at the time of marriage, it takes some time for couples to accumulate enough of these to actually distress their marriage. Huston and his associates (e.g., Huston, Niehuis, & Smith, 2001) use the term "enduring-dynamics" to characterize the hypothesis that patterns established early in the relationship persevere and lead to later declines in marital happiness. Although there is sound evidence for the enduring dynamics model, it should also be pointed out that negative changes in feelings and behaviors can also be identified in couples headed for divorce (Huston, Caughlin et al., 2001). Consequently, many marriages end up on the rocks because of both enduring patterns of interaction that predate the marriage as well as changes in the marriage that lead to disillusion.

Separation from the Family

The concept of "togetherness" figures prominently in most people's ideas of marriage and family. People marry, in part, with the hope of spending time with their spouse. When people have children, it is at least assumed that they have an interest in raising the child and spending leisure time with him or her. Unfortunately, these ideals and expectations are interfered with for families that experience separations. In this section we review the causes and consequences of family separations. The focus here is not on the sort of separations that distressed couples agree to, perhaps as a prelude to divorce, but rather separations that are to some extent involuntary and caused by matters external to the family relationship. These stressors seriously alter the family system by necessitating dramatic shifts in roles and creating unfulfilled desires for intimacy and companionship. In addition, the stressors often create new decision making, financial, and childrearing burdens. Family separations fundamentally alter communication between family members, often eliminating face-to-face interaction all together and forcing members to communicate over the telephone, through email, and written letters.

The two primary reasons why married couples are sometimes physically separated from each other (known as "marital noncohabitation") are military duty and incarceration in jail or prison (Rindfuss & Stephen, 1990). Recently, it has become more common to see spouses living apart for job reasons. Such couples are said to have a "commuter marriage." These types of marital separations are especially common among young married couples in the 18–24 age range. Over 10% of young Black married couples and 5–6% of young White couples experience marital noncohabitation. Evidence of the stressfulness of these separations is clear from statistics showing that marital noncohabitation significantly increases the likelihood of divorce

(Rindfuss & Stephen, 1990). Rindfuss and Stephen explain this effect by noting that the longer couples are apart, the more they may have changed in each other's absence. When they resume living together, the adjustments that are needed to reaccommodate the spouses into each other's lives may be more than what their marriage can bear.

Separations Caused by Military Duty

It is interesting to note that one of the dominant theories of family stress, Hill's ABC-X model (see chapter 10), was developed from studying families that had to deal with the stress of having their husband/father go to the military during WWII and return home again. Military duty brings stressors that are common to most family separations such as childrearing burdens and unfulfilled desires for contact and companionship. Additionally, during wartime, there is the enormous burden of uncertainty about the family member's eventual return. Will he or she be killed in action or injured? Will combat permanently change his or her personality? Concern over these matters adds a serious psychological burden to many families of military personnel.

Active military duty appears to be associated with decreases in marital satisfaction (Schumm, Bell, & Gade, 2000). In this investigation, married soldiers who were deployed to the Middle East in the mid-1990s showed a noticeable drop in their marital satisfaction while on active duty, apart from their spouses. Upon their return, most experienced an increase in marital satisfaction that was generally equivalent to predeployment levels. However, Schumm and his colleagues found that this stressor proved to be too much for some marriages. Particularly for couples who had marital problems prior to the deployment, this separation was associated with increased rates of marital dissolution over the ensuing two years. In a related investigation, wives of soldiers deployed in Operation Desert Storm reported significantly increased emotional distress while their husbands were away (Medway, Davis, Cafferty, Chappell, & O'Hearn, 1995). The Medway et al. study is noteworthy for documenting what appears to be a spill-over effect for mother's stress. The more personal distress the mother reported, the more her children exhibited behavior problems while their father was away. Regardless of whether the children were reacting to their stressed out mother, or whether the mother was stressed because of her children's behavior problems, it is apparent that this family stressor had a system-wide impact. Consistent with the concept of interdependence in family systems theory, the problems and stresses experienced by one family member clearly had an impact on other members of the family.

One of the major communication challenges faced by military families is the need to change from a closed back to an open communication style upon the return of the military service member (Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008). Faber et al. found that when family members were on active duty, their spouses would grow accustomed to making decisions and carrying on activities without communicating their thoughts and actions. However, upon return of the family member, spouses had to adjust to once again explain their ongoing thoughts and activities, and that called for careful renegotiation of boundaries within the family system.

Separations Caused by Incarceration

Imprisonment can have a devastating effect on the family system. Like other forms of family separation, it creates burdens for childrearing and unmet needs for companionship. Because imprisonment is far more likely to happen to fathers than mothers, it often creates a massive financial burden on the family, due to the loss of the father's income. In addition, this is a family stressor associated with a powerful stigma. Many family members are not comfortable disclosing to others that their spouse's or parent's absence is due to imprisonment. Communication with the incarcerated family members becomes extremely restricted to letters,

occasional visits that are generally supervised, and perhaps on rare occasion a phone call (O'Brien et al., 2005).

Long term prison sentences can destroy many marriages. The odds of getting divorced are multiplied by 3.6 when a husband is imprisoned (Lopoo & Western, 2005). Spouses not only have to wait years, decades, or in some cases indefinitely for reunion with their partner, but they also have to cope with feelings of anger, shame, and resentment for being deserted without contributing to the reason for the abandonment (Kaslow, 1987). Because imprisonment often involves long-term family absences, family roles once served by the now-imprisoned member must be divided up among the remaining family members. This can be a source of additional stress and resentment.

The marital separation imposed by incarceration contributes to increased loneliness for inmates (Segrin & Flora, 2001). However, the quality of inmates' marriages can be a source of hope that helps to maintain psychological adjustment while in prison. Segrin and Flora (2001) found that inmates who had a positive relational history with their spouse were able to maintain a higher degree of marital quality (i.e., satisfaction and commitment) while in prison. This in turn appeared to minimize their experience of loneliness. So while incarceration has an obvious negative effect on family relationships, strong family relationships can be extremely beneficial to the individual doing time in prison.

Nowhere is the family system-wide impact of imprisonment more apparent than in the effects on children of incarcerated mothers. When mothers are imprisoned, family members have to deal with stigmatization, loneliness, arranging visitation schedules for the mother and her children, and most notably, arranging for long term care for the children (Hale, 1988). Many mothers who are in prison have to cope with feelings that they failed as a mother (Shamai & Kochal, 2008). These feelings can put imprisoned mothers in a difficult dilemma of avoiding contact with their children, mostly out of shame, versus trying to contain their pain and still maintain contact with their children (Shamai & Kochal).

Of course, many fathers separated from their families by prison also have to cope with feelings of being a poor father (O'Brien et al., 2005). It is interesting that some of the fathers in O'Brien et al.'s study appeared particularly careful to maintain what were often fragile relationships with the mothers of their children, perhaps realizing that these mothers had sole responsibility for the child's welfare and could facilitate contact between the father and his children.

When parents are imprisoned the chore of childrearing is sometimes taken up by grandparents. One of the major factors contributing to the psychological distress of a mother whose adult son is imprisoned is the added burden of taking care of her grandchildren (the son's children) and additional financial responsibility that comes along with that family obligation (Green, Ensminger, Robertson, & Juon, 2006). The dilemma of child care and its attendant financial burdens illustrates the obvious stress pileup that is associated with the imprisonment of family members. The primary stressor (imprisonment) brings with it a host of other stressors that the family must address, especially when young children are involved.

The management of these stressors has important societal implications as prisoners who are able to maintain some degree of visitation with family members and who are ultimately released into an intact family environment are far less likely to re-offend and return to prison (Hale, 1988). Furthermore, the management of these stressors can have a profound effect on the welfare of the child whose parent is in prison. When caregivers can maintain a responsive, stimulating, and safe family environment for children of incarcerated mothers, risk to the child's development can be minimized (Poehlmann, 2005).

Balancing Work and Family

As more families feel the economic necessity of having two incomes and the vast majority of single parents have to maintain full time jobs to support their family, conflicts between work and family inevitably arise. The study of how families and employees manage the stressors and

demands associated with these multiple roles has become prominent in family science. For working parents, even mundane tasks like picking the children up from school can require careful negotiation and interaction with spouses and child care agents (Medved, 2004). This research illustrates the difficulty of simultaneously being a parent, spouse, and employee, but at the same time shows how certain communication practices can mitigate that burden.

Work to Family Conflict (WFC)

Work to family conflict occurs when job related role demands interfere with the execution of family related roles. For example, a parent who has to work late hours several days a week may not be available to take his or her child to some after school functions. Such a parent would experience the stress of work to family conflict. One of the dominant models of WFC was developed by Frone, Russell, and Cooper (1992) and describes four features that contribute to WFC. In this model job involvement, job stress, and work hours are all assumed to contribute to greater WFC. At the same time, supportive communication from the workplace (e.g., a supervisor) is thought to lessen WFC. Scientific research generally shows that these four components are good predictors of WFC (Ford, Heinen, & Langkamer, 2007; Michel, Mitchelson, Kotrba, LeBreton, & Baltes, 2009).

One of the unfortunate side effects of WFC is withdrawal from family interaction. When working mothers experience job stress they can be irritable when they return home from work and respond to that stress by being less behaviorally and emotionally involved with their young children (Repetti & Wood, 1997). WFC has negative effects on the quality of interaction between parent and child (Cinamon, Weisel, & Tzuk, 2007), but these effects also spill over into marital interactions. On days of high job stress, men tend to withdraw from interaction with their wives, whereas wives exhibit more angry behavior in interactions with their husbands (Schulz, Cowan, Cowan, & Brennan, 2004). Just as family systems theory (e.g., interdependence) would predict, the WFC of one spouse is positively associated with the WFC of the other spouse (Bakker, Demerouti, & Dolland, 2008; Westman & Etzion, 2005), and this is known as a crossover effect. WFC also has negative consequences for marital distress, job burnout, and life satisfaction (Innstrand, Langballe, Espnes, Falkum, & Aasland, 2008; Lambert, Kass, Piotrowski, & Vodanovich, 2006; Rantanen, Kinnunen, Feldt, & Pulkkinen, 2008).

Perhaps one of the greatest antidotes to WFC is supportive communication. When working husbands and wives provide social support to each other, especially in the domain of each other's parenting roles, WFC can be attenuated and satisfying marriages can be maintained in at least some cases (Edwards, 2007; Westman & Etzion, 2005). Another important source of socially supportive communication for minimizing WFC comes from the work environment itself, particularly supervisors. Working parents who receive supportive messages from their supervisors tend to experience lower WFC and better family outcomes (Bernas & Major, 2000; Lambert et al., 2006; Ransford, Crouter, & McHale, 2008).

Family to Work Conflict (FWC)

Family to work conflict is experienced when the family demands are in conflict with the performance of one's job responsibilities. A common example of this would be a working parent who has a sick child that s/he needs to stay home with, requiring time off work. In Frone et al.'s (1992) theoretical model, family to work conflict is predicted by higher levels of family conflict and family stress, and lower levels of family support and time spent with family. Research findings are generally consistent in showing these factors to be important determinants of FWC (Ford et al., 2007).

Krouse and Afifi (2007) studied FWC by interviewing working mothers who were employed in care-giving professions such as nursing and day care centers. They found that most of the

women's FWC centered around the care of their children and the extent to which their job allowed for, or interfered with, this family role. Krouse and Affi found that the women developed a number of effective communicative coping mechanisms as they found a way to be a caregiver in both the family and career contents. These mechanisms included using work as a social outlet, venting with coworkers, venting with supervisors, receiving affirmation from coworkers, and receiving instrumental support from coworkers and supervisors. In other words, for many of these women, their job and the people they worked with were a major conduit to coping with the demands of caring for their families.

The Krouse and Affi (2007) investigation highlights a larger theme in the FWC literature that was also evident in the research findings on WFC, and that is the importance of social support. Social support from the family, especially emotional support, can lessen felt stress from family responsibilities, thereby lessening FWC (Bernas & Major, 2000). Similarly, social support from a supervisor at work has also proven to lessen FWC by lessening the employee's conflict with the other parent (Michel, Mitchelson, Pichler, & Cullen, 2010; Seiger & Wiese, 2009). Presumably, supervisors who work with their employees to help them coordinate their work and family responsibilities are not only helping the employee, but the employee's spouse as well.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we explored the function of several normative and several nonnormative stressors on the family. It is important to bear in mind that the family life cycle from which normative stressors emanate is just a heuristic tool for describing and organizing certain family stressors. Not all families experience all of these stressors and not all experience them in the same order. Also, many of the so-called "nonnormative" stressors, such as occasional declines in marital satisfaction, are in fact rather common. Perhaps the two most frequently recurring themes in the research on particular family stressors are heterogeneity in family responses to stress and the powerful relationship between pre-stress family adjustment and post-stress adjustment. Heterogeneity in response means that not all families handle stressors the same. As we learned in chapter 2, in the presentation of family systems theory, the concepts of equifinality and multifinality suggest that families can take different routes to the same end point, and that families can take the same input but all end up at different end points. These concepts are clearly illustrated in the research findings on family stressors (e.g., Fitzpatrick, Vangelisti, & Firman, 1994). In addition, the best predictor of the family's adjustment to a stressor is their adjustment before the stressor occurred. Distressed families will often be seriously impaired by stressors. Well functioning families, on the other hand, appear able to handle stressors and readjust without as much difficulty, regardless of the nature of the stressor. In all cases, stressors present numerous communication tasks to families and invariably cause dramatic changes in family interaction patterns that sometimes return to normal and sometimes remain permanently changed.

12 Divorce

Most people enter into marriage with high hopes and the best of intentions. However, the chances of staying together “until death do us part” are no different than calling heads or tails when flipping a coin. Divorce is commonly regarded as one of the most serious stressors a person can experience, ranking right up there with death of a spouse or child. Perhaps because people start off with such high hopes, the dissolution of a marriage can be devastating. The wreckage left behind in the wake of divorce does not just involve husbands and wives, but often children, in-laws (who are often grandparents), mutual friends, family homes, and acrimoniously divided property.

Divorce has received more research attention for its effects on the family system than perhaps any other family stressor. Over the past 50 years, divorce has become increasingly prevalent in American society. Scientists believe that divorce is best understood as a process, not a discrete event. For some people this process takes years to unfold. For others, the process may consume decades. Because most divorces involve children and extended family, its implications as a stressor are far reaching and often long lasting. Although divorce is ordinarily conceptualized as an “unpredictable” family stressor, as opposed to a normative or developmental family stressor, it turns out that divorce can actually be predicted fairly well from an analysis of married couples’ communication behaviors. In addition to being predictable *from* family communication patterns, divorce also has an effect *on* family communication patterns and relationships. Therefore, it may be most appropriate to think of divorce as a family stressor that is midway between the predictable–unpredictable continuum.

In this chapter we address several fundamental questions about divorce such as “How common is divorce?” “Who gets divorced?” and “What are the societal and individual factors that predict divorce?” We then turn our attention to marital interaction and divorce. In particular, what are the communication patterns that suggest a couple is on their way to divorce? We next examine the question of whether and how divorce has an effect on children. Finally, the various stages and processes associated with divorce are described.

DEMOGRAPHY OF DIVORCE

The term *demography* refers to the statistical study of human population characteristics, particularly as they are influenced by such phenomena as fertility (births), marriages, and mortality (deaths). Before analyzing the relationships between family communication and divorce, it is instructive to briefly review some basic facts about divorce.

Information compiled by the National Center for Health Statistics and U.S. Census Bureau indicates that 50% of all first marriages will experience a disruption (i.e., divorce or separation) within the first 20 years of the relationship (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001; Kreider, 2005). In point of fact, about 45% of all recently initiated marriages are predicted to end in divorce, with

about 5% more ending in permanent separation (Amato, 2010). Of those who separate, 75% divorce within two years and 90% divorce within five years. In other words, separation is a prelude to divorce for the vast majority of separating couples. Consequently, marrying couples today have at best 50/50 odds at long term success (Cherlin, 1992; Goldstein, 1999; Kreider & Fields, 2002). Despite all of the attention paid to divorce as a family stressor, societal problem, and legal matter, it is not a new phenomenon. In the 1930s, two in every six marriages ended in divorce (National Center for Health Statistics, 1973), and with the exception of a sharp spike in the divorce rate right after WWII, there was a gradual increase in the divorce rate up to the 1960s. During the 1960s and 1970s the divorce rate accelerated dramatically. In the United States, 1974 marked the first year that more marriages ended in divorce as opposed to death. That pattern has not changed since. Death now causes about 78% as many marital dissolutions as divorce does (Glick, 1988; Pinsof, 2002). The divorce rate finally leveled off in the 1980s and there is some evidence to suggest that the divorce rate has dropped just slightly in the past few years (Amato, 2010). A detailed trend study showed that divorce proneness (e.g., thinking about divorce, discussing divorce with the spouse) did not change over the period of 1980 to 2000 despite the fact that marital interaction (e.g., eating dinner, visiting friends, recreation) reliably decreased in the United States during this same time period (Amato, Johnson, Booth, & Rogers, 2003). The stability of divorce proneness in recent years appears to be the result of positive forces such as greater family income, decision-making equality, and support for the norm of a lifelong marriage offsetting the negative effects of spouses leading increasingly separate lives.

Why has there been such a dramatic increase in the divorce rate over the past 30–40 years? What are the causes of divorce today? The answers to these questions are not simple. Like most phenomena involving people, there appear to be multiple factors that influence divorce. We will first consider societal and individual factors associated with divorce, and then examine communication and social interaction behaviors associated with divorce. According to family systems theory, the family exists in a larger eco-system (i.e., society) and takes input from that system. To fully understand divorce as a family stressor, it is vital to consider the role of the larger societal system on the family. Also, as a system, the family is made up of individual parts, each of which have qualities of their own that will influence the family system that they belong to.

SOCIETAL FACTORS

In the past 50 years, there have been a number of dramatic changes in American society that have clearly impacted the divorce rate. The women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s saw dramatically increasing numbers of women obtaining college degrees and entering the workforce. Consequently, the economic constraints that faced women who wanted to get out of bad marriages were no longer as powerful as they had been in the past. There is a positive association between married women's employment, income, and probability of divorce (Teachman, Polonko, & Scanzoni, 1999). Currently, about two-thirds of all divorces are initiated by women (Brinig & Allen, 2000), suggesting that societal norms that improved women's welfare and agency also removed some of their barriers to leaving an undesirable marriage.

As the women's movement of the 1960s was taking off, members of the "baby-boomer" generation (people born shortly after WWII) were becoming adults. At this time there was a growing emphasis on individualism and self-fulfillment that is still an influential force in society to this day. Americans place great value on their personal and civil rights. Today, most people expect marriage to be a means of achieving considerable personal and emotional fulfillment. Historically, many marriages were initiated as a means of securing economic well-being and independence from parents. Although these factors are still evident to some extent in society,

people have come to expect, if not demand, much more from their marriages. When these expectations for fulfillment are not met, many people choose to end their marriage, presumably with the goal of finding a better partner.

Cultural attitudes toward divorce have also changed dramatically over the past 50 years. There was a time when divorced people were looked down upon. However, as increasing numbers of people divorced, society started to view divorce as a more normative phenomenon. This “normalization” in turn, may have removed yet another perceived barrier to divorce for some segments of society. Changing societal views toward divorce are clearly reflected in reformed divorce laws. Divorce used to involve a civil court proceeding that resembled the trial of a lawsuit. During the 1970s, most states enacted no-fault divorce laws that dramatically streamlined the process of getting a divorce. During that decade the number of divorces in the U.S. almost tripled (Faust & McKibben, 1999). In addition to normalizing divorce and prompting less stringent divorce laws, changing societal attitudes toward divorce were also reflected in changing views of family functions. In a 1985 survey, only 18% of respondents felt that an unhappily married couple should stay together when there are children in the family (Thorton, 1989). Collectively, these phenomena indicate that society has become more accepting of divorce as a legitimate course of action for individuals who are dissatisfied with their marriage.

INDIVIDUAL RISK FACTORS

Nobody enters into a marriage with a blank slate. People bring their attitudes, past experiences, occupations, and education with them into marriage. Many of these factors appear to have an appreciable impact on the likelihood that a couple will get divorced or remain married. Below we highlight seven individual level risk factors that have been documented to increase the likelihood of divorce (see Faust & McKibben, 1999, and Karney & Bradbury, 1995, for more in depth reviews).

First, there is a negative association between *age* at marriage and probability of divorce. The younger people are when they marry, the more likely they will get divorced. This relationship holds up to about age 35, after which divorce rates for first marriages begin to increase. Second, divorce rates vary by *race and ethnicity*. Blacks have a substantially higher divorce rate than Whites or Hispanics, and the divorce rate for Asians and Pacific Islanders is lower than that of Whites and Hispanics. A third personal risk factor is *parental divorce*. As we will show later in this chapter, people whose parents divorced are themselves more likely to divorce than people whose parents never divorced. Fourth, *socioeconomic status* is inversely related to the probability of divorce. People who are better off financially typically have higher education levels, and perhaps better interpersonal skills learned in educational and business settings that contribute positively to the success of their marriages. It is worth noting that the drop in the divorce rate since 1980 is confined to those with college degrees. The divorce rate has been fairly stable for those with a high school diploma, and continues to increase for those with less than a high school education (Cherlin, 2010). Fifth, many people enter into marriages with *unrealistic and idealized notions* of what marriage will entail. Demo, Fine, and Ganong (2000) argue that when these romanticized ideals for marriage are combined with the high premium placed on personal fulfillment, marital stability is undermined. This is because the realities of marriage rarely meet idealized expectations. Sixth, *religion* can influence the likelihood of divorce. Religiosity is negatively correlated with divorce, especially when both spouses share the same religious beliefs. Because most religions discourage divorce, the effect of religiosity on marital stability may stem in part from greater perceived barriers to divorce in addition to a value of traditional family roles. Finally, the inability to experience intimacy, especially among women, appears to be a risk factor for later divorce (Weinberger, Hofstein, & Whitbourne, 2008). Weinberger et al. (2008) studied a group of women when they were in college in the 1960s

and later assessed their relationship status between 2000–2002. They found that women with a lower propensity to experience intimacy in college (as indicated by items such as “comfortable in intimate relationships”) were more likely to have been divorced in the following 34 years, compared to women with a greater propensity to experience intimacy.

PREMARITAL RELATIONSHIP FACTORS

Research has identified two premarital relationship issues that are associated with a greater likelihood of eventual divorce. First, *premarital pregnancy* seriously increases the risk for divorce. Faust and McKibben (1999) argue that premarital pregnancy causes hasty marriage that stops the mate selection process, in addition to limiting educational and career opportunities. These stresses, combined with family disapproval, place an overwhelming burden on many such marriages. A second documented risk factor for divorce is *premarital cohabitation*. There is an interesting set of circumstances surrounding premarital cohabitation that help to explain its apparent ill effects on later marriage. Individuals who cohabit before marriage have less traditional views of marriage, are more approving of divorce, are more likely to be involved in drugs and alcohol abuse, experience more difficulties with the law, and have lower education levels than those who do not (e.g., Booth & Johnson, 1988; Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991). It therefore stands to reason that it may not be cohabitation per se that mars a future marriage, but the type of person who cohabits, along with his or her attendant stressors, that detract from the longevity of subsequent marriage. It is also clear that cohabitation increases the risk of subsequent divorce only when it occurs before engagement (Kline et al., 2004; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009). The divorce rate among couples who cohabit after engagement is not distinguishable from those who do not cohabit at all prior to marriage. Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman (2006) use inertia theory to explain this. According to the theory, cohabitation creates more constraints to stay together (e.g., financial dependence, social pressures, pregnancy) that in turn cause couples to marry when they might not have chosen to were they not living together. By way of contrast, presumably those couples who are already engaged have more intrinsic, relationship-driven motivations for their marital commitment.

RISK FACTORS IN THE STRUCTURE OF MARRIAGE

Before examining actual interaction patterns that predict divorce, it is worth noting that there are at least two issues inherent in the structure of some marriages that can influence the likelihood of divorce. First, married couples *with children* are slightly less likely to divorce than couples without children. Although this effect is weak, it reflects the fact that many couples have a preference for raising their children in a dual parent household, even when the quality of their marriage is suspect. Second, *remarriage* is a powerful risk factor for divorce. Second marriages have a divorce rate that is at least 10% higher than first marriages (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001). Like cohabitation, this effect may be due to the personal qualities of those who remarry (the same qualities that previously led to divorce), as opposed to remarriage per se.

MARITAL INTERACTION PATTERNS THAT PREDICT DIVORCE

Notwithstanding the effects of societal, personal, and structural relationship factors on divorce, much of what apparently causes marriage to come undone can be found in the substance and

form of marital interactions. Before we examine some of these communication variables that are predictive of marital decline, it is important to dispel two common misconceptions about marital relations and divorce. First, marital satisfaction is not a strong predictor of later divorce (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). This is because there is a large number of people who are relatively dissatisfied with their marriage but stay married anyway (Huston, Caughlin et al., 2001). Consequently, knowing a couple's present satisfaction with their marriage may not be very useful for predicting their likelihood of divorce 10 years later. Although most marriages headed for divorce are marked by dissatisfaction, not all dissatisfied marriages end in divorce. For economic, family, moral, or personal reasons many people who are in distressed marriages remain in the relationship instead of seeking a divorce.

A second misconception about marital communication and divorce is that conflicts and disagreements harm marriages and move them toward divorce. As we will show in more detail below, it is not the sheer frequency of conflicts and disagreements that strongly predicts subsequent divorce, but rather the *form* of these conflicts and disagreements that predispose couples to divorce. In one study of over 1000 married people, respondents were asked about their experiences with various marital problems such as a spouse not being home often enough, drinking or using drugs, being too critical, or spending money foolishly (Amato & Rogers, 1997). Even though the total number of problems was a significant predictor of divorce over the ensuing 12 years, experiences of specific relationship problems such as a spouse being too domineering, critical, or spouses not talking to each other were actually stronger predictors of divorce. These variables suggest that the nature of a couple's interactions better predicts marital outcomes than just the total number of their marital problems.

Perhaps one of the greatest accomplishments in family science over the past 30 years has been the documentation of marital interaction patterns that predict divorce. As this analysis will show, the markers for divorce are often evident long before the legal divorce is executed. For example, a recent longitudinal investigation followed 199 White and 174 Black newlywed couples over a period of 14 years (Orbuch et al., 2002). By the 14th year of this study, just over 40% of the couples had divorced. Those husbands or wives who reported higher levels of destructive conflict interactions (those that involved yelling, insulting, having to have the last word, etc.) were more likely to be divorced by the end of the study than couples who did not engage in these destructive behaviors. However, the simple frequency of marital conflicts was not significantly predictive of divorce. Also, the odds of divorce were negatively associated with husbands feeling affirmed emotionally by their wives (i.e., she makes him feel good about his ideas, she is caring toward him, she makes him feel good about the kind of person he is).

The deleterious effects of dysfunctional conflict have also been documented by Rogge and Bradbury (1999b). They found that the use of violent conflict tactics early in a marriage was predictive of divorce over the following four years. The Amato and Rogers (1997) study mentioned previously used reports of married couples' problems in 1980 to predict who would be divorced by 1992. Many of the problems that were significant predictors of divorce were essentially communication problems. These included being too domineering, being critical of the spouse, not talking enough with each other, and not being home often enough. A similar collection of negative conflict behaviors such as negative escalations (e.g., name calling, bringing up past transgressions), criticism, withdrawal from arguments, and making overly negative interpretations of the partner's behavior have been strongly associated with married people contemplating divorce (Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). These results highlight the corrosive effect of dysfunctional conflict behaviors—either aggressive engagement or withdrawal—as well as the protective effect (at least for husbands) of emotional affirmation from the spouse on marital stability. Related findings showing that tendencies to express hostility and aggression premaritally significantly predict subsequent divorce (Rogge, Bradbury, Hahlweg, Engl, & Thurmaier, 2006) further illustrate the serious effects of these negative communication behaviors.

It is not only the presence of dysfunctional negative communication, but the absence of positive communication that predicts divorce (Markman, Rhoades, Stanley, Ragan, & Whitton, 2010). Markman et al. (2010) studied the communication quality of 210 couples, right before marriage, and followed them up annually for five years. During that period 17% of the couples divorced. Their findings indicated that the degree of negative communication (e.g., expressing negative affect, denial, dominance, conflict, withdrawal) and the lack of positive communication (e.g., expressing positive affect, support/validation, and demonstrating problem solving skills) during premarital interaction were both predictors of subsequent divorce. In a similar study, 100 couples were followed for the first 13 years of their marriage (Clements, Stanley, & Markman, 2004). Couples in the Clements et al. (2004) investigation who were most likely to divorce exhibited a considerable degree of emotionally invalidating behaviors (insulting or acting in unsupportive ways toward the partner, sarcasm, mind-reading with negative affect) before marriage. The husbands in this study who ultimately divorced rated their partners' communication as less positive than the husbands who remained married. These researchers concluded that "the seeds of marital distress and divorce are sown for many couples before they say 'I do'" (Clements et al., 2004, p. 621).

The preponderance of negative and dysfunctional communication between spouses, that is evident long before they divorce, suggests that perhaps there are enduring communication problems that ultimately take down many marriages. This is essentially the conclusion reached by Bodenmann et al. (2007) who studied 661 divorced people in Europe and asked them to explain why their marriages ended. The most commonly endorsed cause of their divorces was a lack of dyadic skills (e.g., poor communication, problem solving, and coping between spouses). A similar lack of relational skills at the time of marriage has also been shown to predict downward trajectories in marital satisfaction (Lawrence et al., 2008). This finding corroborates the explanations of divorced spouses in Bodenmann et al.'s research, even though one study was retrospective and the other prospective.

The Behavioral Cascade Toward Divorce

Since the late 1970s, psychologist John Gottman and his associates have been studying married couples in their laboratory and tracking their marital satisfaction and stability over subsequent years. In a typical study, couples come to the lab, complete a series of questionnaires about themselves and their marriages, participate in an interview about their marriage, and engage in a 10–15 minute conflict resolution interaction while being recorded. Gottman and his associates then recontact the couples over subsequent years to track the well-being of their marriage. A number of key findings have emerged from this program of research that inform our understanding of the marital processes that lead up to divorce.

Gottman and his colleagues discovered processes referred to as "cascades" that mark the progression toward divorce (Carrère & Gottman, 1999; Gottman, 1993b, 1994; Gottman & Levenson, 1992). The steps in the cascade form what is known as a Guttman scale. In a Guttman scale, presence at each stage implies that prior stages have already been passed. For example, educational degrees form a Guttman scale. All people with bachelor's degrees already hold a high school diploma. Similarly, all people with master's degrees have already passed through the high school and bachelor's stages of educational attainment.

Gottman's research on married couples shows that there is a hallmark cascade of corrosive communication behaviors that mark the trajectory toward divorce. Analyses of couples' laboratory interactions while trying to resolve a conflict in their relationship revealed a series of behaviors that are ominous signs of impending deterioration for the relationship. This behavioral cascade is depicted in Figure 12.1 and starts with a behavior Gottman calls *complain/criticize*. All married people express their dissatisfaction to their spouses from time to time. However, couples on their way to divorce have a tendency to weave criticism in with their expression of dissatisfaction. For example the following statement could be viewed

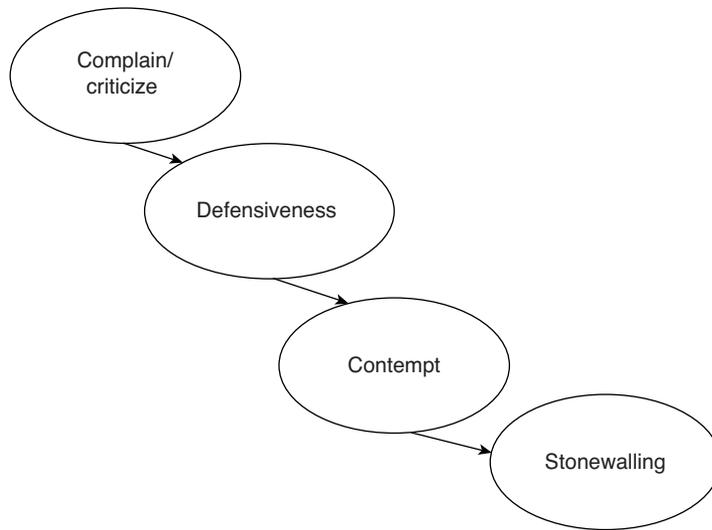


Figure 12.1 Gottman's behavioral cascade model of marital dissolution (a.k.a. "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse").

Note. Adapted from Gottman (1994). Copyright 1994 by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. Adapted by permission.

as a complaint: "I have a lot of things to do before the party tonight. It would be nice if you could help out a little." People in marriages that are cascading toward divorce have a tendency to add a degree of insult or blame to their complaints. An example of such a complaint/criticism might be "I have so much to do to get ready for the party tonight. It would be nice if you could give me a hand for once instead of sitting in front of the television." In the second example the same complaint is presented, but this time it is coupled with a criticism of the partner and a clear implication that this person is generally not very helpful. What elevates complaint to the level of criticism is the addition of blame, often executed with terms such as "you always" and "you never" (Gottman, 1999).

The next step in the behavioral cascade is *defensiveness*. When people get defensive in marital interactions they try to protect themselves from criticism and avoid blame. In so doing they deny any responsibility for wrongdoing. Usually, people get defensive when they perceive that they are under attack and being victimized in some way. Gottman finds that defensiveness is sometimes coupled with whining. These "that's not fair" and "I didn't do anything wrong" messages are often delivered in a high-pitched tone, with a stretched out syllable at the end. According to Gottman (1994) whining has an "innocent victim" posture behind it. It should be obvious that defensiveness basically shuts down the process of conflict resolution. If a spouse will not accept responsibility for any wrongdoing, and puts up his or her guard, perhaps with a bit of whining added in for good measure, it is easy to see how conflict discussions will get no where.

The third link in the chain of corrosive communication behaviors is *contempt*. There is perhaps no single communication behavior that is as destructive to marriage, and healthy relationships more generally, than contempt. When people express contempt, they mock or insult their partner. Their communication sends the message "you are stupid" or "you are incompetent." In the lab this is manifest as hostile humor, mockery, or sarcasm (Gottman, 1994). Contempt is also communicated through a particular facial expression that involves pulling back one corner of the mouth and perhaps rolling the eyes. In its extreme form, contempt is literally a sign of bitter put-down and hatred toward the partner. Once again, it is fairly obvious that by this stage of the cascade toward divorce, spouses feel and behave so viciously toward each other that they are creating unrepairable damage to their marriage.

The final stage in the behavioral cascade is *stonewalling*. When people engage in stonewalling, they show no signs of receiving messages from their partner. Their facial expressions are often blank and they may not even make eye contact with their spouse. Obviously, people who stonewall make no contribution to an on-going conversation aside from sending the nonverbal message that “I’m not listening to you,” or “you’re not even here.” Some people are surprised to learn that the final stage of the cascade toward divorce is a behavior like stonewalling that has more to do with silence than yelling and screaming. However, this is more understandable upon considering the fact that stonewalling is a manifestation of emotional divestment from the marriage. People stonewall when they no longer care enough about the relationship to put forth the effort to engage in conflict. As negative as some conflicts may sound, at least they indicate that the couple sees enough value in the future of their relationship to fight for what they believe in. But when people stonewall, they have more or less given up on the relationship. This type of communication behavior represents a psychological departure from the marriage, and is a sign of impending doom.

The net result of these four communication behaviors is so destructive to marriage that Gottman characterizes them as “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.” He stresses that “if these negative patterns of interaction are not reversed in time, there is a point of no return, after which not much can be done to save the marriage” (Gottman, 2000, p. 217). In other words, couples that characteristically progress through this downward spiral in their conflicts can literally seal their fate through destructive communication behaviors.

The Distance and Isolation Cascade Toward Divorce

There is an additional cascade model that illustrates husbands’ and wives’ reactions to their conflicts that is also descriptive of the road leading to divorce. Gottman refers to this as the distance and isolation cascade. This cascade model is illustrated in Figure 12.2.

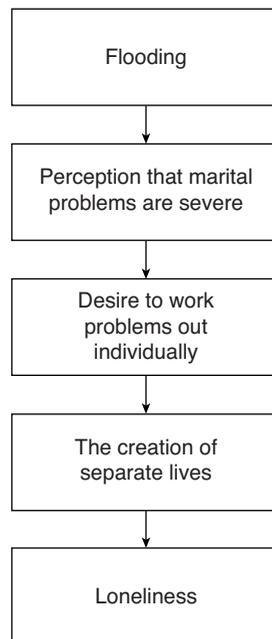


Figure 12.2 Gottman’s Distance and Isolation Cascade.

Note. Adapted from Gottman (1994). Copyright 1994 by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. Adapted by permission.

The distance and isolation cascade starts with a phenomenon that has proven to be very important in the marital interaction literature: *flooding*. Flooding occurs when a spouse feels caught off guard and overwhelmed by his or her partner's negative emotion. This feeling of being overwhelmed is so powerful that spouses will do anything to escape from the situation. When flooded, people feel like their partner's negative emotions seem to come from out of nowhere—that they were unprovoked and unexpected. The feeling of aversion that is associated with flooding leads to a *perception that the marital problems are severe*. People who are flooded cannot comprehend their spouse's negativity. This perception contributes to an appraisal of their problems as serious and perhaps impossible to resolve as a couple, because the motivation is to get away from the spouse's negativity, rather than engage him/her in an effort to bring resolution to the marital problems. The next stage in the distance and isolation cascade is a *desire to work problems out individually rather than together*. At this stage spouses do not see their partner as a conduit to resolution of their difficulties. Rather, they feel that they need to "save themselves" and "go it alone." This in turn prompts *the creation of separate lives*. At this stage spouses begin to spend less time together and establish their own identities and routines without each other. The final stage in this cascade is loneliness. Although it may sound paradoxical to feel lonely while simultaneously being married, marriages that have degenerated to this austere condition no longer supply the type of emotional fulfillment and social companionship that most people associate with marriage. For such people loneliness is the psychological end of the line in their marriage.

Positivity and Negativity in Marital Interactions

In addition to the cascade models of marital interactions and divorce, Gottman's work has illuminated the role of positivity and negativity in marital interactions. Traditionally, many people have felt that negative interaction behaviors such as conflicts have negative effects on marital longevity, whereas positive interaction behaviors like compliments, praise, and expressing affection, help to hold marriages together. However, it is not the sheer frequency of negative or positive interaction behaviors that predicts marital outcomes, but rather, their ratio. In stable marriages, also referred to as *regulated* marriages, spouses exhibit a ratio of positive to negative interaction behaviors that is overwhelmingly skewed toward the positive (Gottman, 1993b, 1994). In marriages that are headed for divorce, referred to as *nonregulated* marriages, couples exhibit fewer positive behaviors (e.g., humor, agreement) and more negative behaviors (e.g., put-down, criticism, defensiveness) in their interactions. These findings show that some marriages can remain happy and intact despite a high frequency of negative communication behaviors between the husband and wife, so long as they are disproportionately balanced with more positive communication behaviors.

Positivity and negativity in marital interactions appear to affect marital outcomes at different points in time. Gottman and Levenson (2000) discovered this by following a group of married couples over a 14-year period. By the end of the study, they compared those couples who had divorced sometime during the first seven years of their marriage (early divorce) to those who divorced some time after 14 years of marriage (later divorce). The presence of negative communication behaviors, such as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (i.e., criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling), is most evident in couples headed for an early divorce. On the other hand, the *lack* of positive marital communication behaviors (e.g., showing interest, humor, affection-caring) predicts later divorcing couples. It seems that negative marital communication behaviors such as defensiveness and contempt make marriages almost intolerable. They will destroy a marriage very quickly. However, the absence of positive behaviors appears to more gradually erode marital quality. It is easier to tolerate a lack of positivity in marriage than the presence of angry, hostile behaviors from a partner. But eventually those marriages that lack positive interactions between spouses are seen for what little they are worth and terminated.

ACCOUNTS OF MARITAL HISTORIES THAT PREDICT DIVORCE

It is possible to accurately predict which couples will eventually divorce by analyzing the way that they tell the story of their marriage (Buehlman et al., 1992; Carrère et al., 2000). Using a technique called the Oral History Interview (described in chapter 6), researchers find that couples whose relationship stories are marked by very little *fondness* toward the partner, *we-ness*, and *glorifying the struggle*, and high levels of *marital disappointment*, and *chaos*, are especially likely to divorce over the ensuing 3–5 years (Buehlman et al., 1992; Carrère et al., 2000). These studies show that as husbands and wives talk about their marriage, there are markers in their discourse which indicate that their marriage is headed for trouble. For example, couples at risk for divorce will talk about their marriage with a lot of references to “I,” “me,” and “mine,” whereas those who are less likely to divorce use terms like “we,” “us,” and “ours.” Similarly, happy couples will acknowledge that they have had some tough times in their relationship. However, they look back at these times of struggle as endeavors that ultimately made them stronger and better as a couple. Couples headed for divorce will also willingly admit to problems in their relationship. However, these couples come across as damaged by their struggles. Instead of emerging from the hard times stronger and better, they feel defeated by their struggles. What is astonishing is the fact that these markers (e.g., chaos, we-ness, glorifying the struggle, etc.) are evident even when the marriages are intact and relatively satisfying to each partner.

Earlier in this chapter we discussed Gottman’s distance and isolation cascade that maps out the psychological run up to divorce. Recall that the cascade started with flooding and ended with loneliness. Researchers have been able to successfully predict which married spouses experience flooding and loneliness based on the accounts of their marital relationship as told through the Oral History Interview (Doohan, Carrère, & Riggs, 2010). Specifically, relationship stories that depict a weak marital bond (e.g., little fondness and we-ness, and a lot of chaos and marital disappointment) tend to be told by spouses who experience more flooding in response to their partner’s negative emotions and who experience more loneliness despite being married. The findings on prediction of divorce as well as key components of the distance and isolation cascade show that divorce is a family stressor that can be predicted not just by how couples communicate *with* each other, but also by the way that they talk *about* each other and their marriage.

PROCESSES THAT PREDICT DIVORCE VS. DISSATISFACTION

Earlier in this chapter we explained that not all dissatisfied marriages end in divorce. Some very dissatisfied couples will remain together indefinitely. It is perhaps therefore understandable that the psychological and social processes that predict marital dissatisfaction are not necessarily one and the same as those that predict divorce. Family scientist Ted Huston and his associates have been analyzing and reporting data collected from their Process of Adaptation in Intimate Relationships (PAIR) Project that speak to this issue (e.g., Caughlin et al., 2000; Huston, Caughlin, et al., 2001; Huston, Niehuis et al., 2001). In this project, Huston and his colleagues followed 168 newlywed couples over the course of 13 years.

Findings from this investigation indicate that marital happiness can be explained by an *enduring dynamics* model. This simply means that what predicts marital satisfaction for those couples who stay married are relatively enduring qualities and traits that people bring to their marriage. For example, people’s trait anxiety is associated with the deterioration of marital happiness, but not necessarily divorce (Caughlin et al., 2000). It is of some interest to note that the association between anxiety and marital distress can be explained, at least to some extent, by communication behaviors. This is because trait anxious people exhibit negativity in their interactions and also elicit negativity from their spouses.

In contrast to the enduring dynamics model, a *disillusionment* model appears to provide better prediction and explanation of those couples that eventually divorce. The disillusionment model explains divorce as stemming from a loss of love and affection and feelings of ambivalence about the marriage. Initially, many couples start out with idealized views of marriage and each other. Disillusionment happens when these idealized views become hard to maintain and are challenged by realities that simply do not sustain the attractive notions that many people hold for their marriage. Note how disillusionment is different from *emergent distress*. In emergent distress, negativity and problems develop and escalate. Findings from the PAIR project indicate however that divorce is better explained by disillusionment, which is a deterioration of positive feelings and behaviors, than emergent distress, which is an escalation of negative feelings and behaviors (Huston, Caughlin, et al., 2001).

POST-DIVORCE FAMILY RELATIONS

Divorce has a massive impact on family systems at least as powerful as the death of an immediate family member. People sometimes incorrectly assume that after a divorce there is no longer any relationship between the divorcing parties. However, family systems inevitably move on after divorce, albeit in a different form. When children are involved, spouses still have to negotiate and maintain some sort of relationship in order to effectively manage their roles as fathers and mothers. Nevertheless, divorce dramatically changes the nature of family relationships and interaction patterns.

What happens to marital relationships after divorce? Graham (1997) studied recently divorced parents and found that there are several different post-divorce relational trajectories into which divorced couples fall. The most common was called the *gradual relational progress* trajectory (Graham, 1997). These couples slowly and steadily developed a functional post-divorce relationship, where their commitment to the relationship actually increased steadily over time. The second most common relational pattern involved the *disrupted progress* couples. Husbands and wives on this trajectory started out with high hopes for an amiable post-divorce relationship, but experienced significant emotionally charged events that hurt their relationship, after which they gradually began to recover and increase their commitment to the relationship. Less common patterns involved *sustained adjustment* where couples maintained their relationship at a fairly high and steady level of commitment, the *disjointed erratic cycle* where couples experienced dramatic and repeated increases and decreases in the quality of their relationship, and the *eventual deterioration* pattern where couples started out with high hopes for a functional post-divorce relationship, but ultimately could not work things out and drifted apart. It is important to bear in mind that the couples in Graham's study were all parents, thus they had a compelling reason for trying to redefine and salvage some sort of relationship after the divorce. Research on divorced couples and families shows that many actually experience some success at maintaining functional post-divorce relationships (Ellwood & Stolberg, 1991; Graham, 1997), and that for couples with children, divorce certainly does not mark the end of their relationship with each other.

Despite the fact that many divorced couples are able to maintain a functional or cooperative relationship for the sake of childrearing, it is equally common for spouses to blame their partner instead of themselves for relational problems (Honeycutt, 1993). When looking back at positive communication behaviors in the marriage (e.g., compliments, expressing support) divorced spouses take personal credit. However, when they recall negative communication behaviors in their relationship (e.g., being domineering, criticizing) divorced couples see their partner as responsible for such conduct. Happily married couples tend to do the exact opposite—they take blame for negative communication behaviors, and report that it is their partners who are making the positive contributions to their interactions (Honeycutt, 1993). Taken together, these findings suggest that although many married couples are able to

manage a functional post-divorce relationship, they still harbor some bitter sentiments and blame toward their partner, and tend not to see themselves as the cause of the marital breakdown.

Divorce produces significant changes in people's social relationships, not just with each other but with their social networks as well. After divorce, many people are forced to move to a new residence, and half of the time people lose friends because of divorce (Wang & Amato, 2000). Just as social networks merge as people form long-term committed relationships, so do social networks fall apart as people break up their relationships. Not surprisingly, the development of new intimate relationships is positively associated with adjustment to divorce (Wang & Amato, 2000). Involvement in these relationships may decrease attachment to the former spouse and have positive effects on overall happiness.

It is perhaps ironic that, in a general sense, the same phenomena that lead up to divorce tend to be the phenomena that help families effectively cope with divorce. We are referring specifically to various forms of family communication. When recently divorced single parents were asked to describe the factors that helped them through the stressful time, 4 of the 5 top factors were communication issues (Greeff & van der Merwe, 2004). These included intra-family support, extended family support, support of friends, and open communication between family members. Divorce undoubtedly takes a negative toll on family members, but effective family communication goes a long way to make the stressor more bearable.

THE EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN

There are few issues in family science that are as contentious as the effects of divorce on children. Writers in both the scientific and lay press have vigorously debated whether divorce has ill effects on children. Some argue that parental divorce causes serious and long lasting troubles for children, whereas others state that most children are resilient and recover rapidly from any negative effects associated with their parents' divorce. A large body of scientific evidence supports a perspective that is somewhere in between these two extremes.

Research Findings

In 1991, sociologists Paul Amato and Bruce Keith conducted a meta-analysis of the research literature on parental divorce and the well-being of children (Amato & Keith, 1991a). A meta-analysis is a statistical analysis of existing studies that combines the effects found in these studies to produce an "overall" estimate of, in this case, the extent to which divorce influences childhood well-being. Amato and Keith (1991a) analyzed 92 studies that involved over 13,000 children, comparing those whose parents were divorced to those who lived with parents that were still married. In about 70% of the studies they found that children from divorced families scored lower on measures of well-being than children from intact families. The measures of well-being included school achievement, conduct, psychological adjustment, self-concept, social adjustment, and parent-child relations.

At first glance, these results appear rather ominous. Children from divorced families seem to have pervasive problems. However, there are several caveats that are absolutely vital to understanding these effects. First and foremost, Amato and Keith (1991a) found that the effects for parental divorce on children's well-being, although statistically significant, were weak in magnitude. Across all the studies reviewed, the median effect size for parental divorce on childhood well-being was $d = .14$. This means that children from divorced parents scored on average .14 standard deviations below the children from intact marriages on the various measures of well-being. A concrete example might help to illustrate the meaning of this difference. Suppose that the average high school grade point average is 2.75, with a standard deviation of 0.75 (this would imply that 68% of all high school students have a GPA between

2.00 and 3.50). A difference of .14 standard deviation units would indicate that children from intact families would have an average GPA of 2.80, whereas children from divorced families would have an average GPA of 2.70.

Amato and Keith also found that the effects of parental divorce on children's psychological adjustment, social adjustment, and on their relationships with their parents were most pronounced for primary- through high school-aged children. For preschool- or college-aged children, the negative effects of parental divorce are noticeably weaker or nonexistent. In addition to the child's age, the negative effects of parental divorce on children seem to be getting smaller in those studies conducted more recently. Studies conducted in the 1950s and 1960s tended to reveal much stronger effects for parental divorce than studies conducted more recently, although recent evidence suggests that this trend may be leveling off (Reifman, Villa, Amans, Rethinam, & Telesca, 2001). In a follow-up meta-analysis of 67 studies conducted in the 1990s, Amato (2001) found that the negative effects of divorce on children were at their lowest in the 1980s, but then started to gradually get stronger in the 1990s. It appears that as divorce became more commonplace in society, its negative effects on children decreased in magnitude. However, recently this trend might be starting to reverse (Amato, 2001).

Divorce appears to have a number of negative consequences for children, across a wide range of domains. However, these effects tend to be weak in magnitude, most pronounced for middle-age children, and weaker today than they were 40–50 years ago. With that stated, *why* does parental divorce affect children? Several hypotheses have been offered to explain these effects (Amato, 1993; Amato & Keith, 1991a).

Parental Absence Perspective

Parenting is a demanding task, and people generally feel that two parents living and working together can do the job better than just one. By being able to assist each other with parenting responsibilities and provide multiple role models, two parent households are assumed to be optimal for children's social and psychological adjustment. Amato and Keith (1991a) found a clever way to test this hypothesis by comparing children from intact families to children from families that experienced the death of a parent. Their results provided some support for the parental absence perspective in that children who experienced the death of a parent had lower scores on academic achievement, conduct, psychological adjustment, and self-esteem than children from intact families. Because their results showed that children from divorced families had even lower well-being than children from families that experienced the death of a parent, one cannot view divorce and parental death as equally deleterious to children's well-being. As an aside, children living with stepparents had significantly more adjustment problems than children living with both biological parents, again questioning the parental absence perspective, and showing that the addition of a stepparent does not "solve" the parental absence problem (Amato & Keith, 1991a).

Economic Disadvantage Perspective

Divorce commonly results in poorer economic conditions for children, at least temporarily. On average, a custodial mother's standard of living decreases 30% after a divorce, and in 1993 about half of all single-mother families were living below the poverty line (Hoffman & Duncan, 1988; Saluter, 1994). Studies that have examined the relationship between family socioeconomic status and children's well-being indicate that reduced family income is partly, but not entirely, responsible for some of the problems experienced by children of divorce. The lower standard of living that often follows divorce may have its strongest effect on children's academic achievement, because of reduced access to resources such as good schools, books, and computers.

Family Conflict Perspective

As indicated earlier in this chapter, divorce is often preceded by periods of dysfunctional conflict. The family conflict perspective holds that the ill effects of divorce on children are largely the result of children's years of exposure to bitter conflict in their families. This hypothesis has been evaluated by comparing children from intact high-conflict families to children from intact low-conflict families (Amato, 1993; Amato & Keith, 1991a). The results clearly demonstrate greater problems with conduct, psychological adjustment, and self-concept among children from high-conflict, intact families, particularly when the children are involved in the conflicts (Burns & Dunlop, 2002). In fact, *children from high-conflict intact families have more adjustment problems than children from divorced families* (Amato & Keith, 1991a). Furthermore, children exposed to high levels of family conflict actually experience *beneficial* effects when their parents divorce (Booth & Amato, 2001). Results such as these provide strong support for the family conflict perspective. Booth and Amato (2001) explain that "escape from a high-conflict marriage benefits children because it removes them from an aversive, stressful home environment. In contrast, a divorce that is not preceded by a prolonged period of overt discord may represent an unexpected, unwelcome, and uncontrollable event that children are likely to experience as stressful" (p. 210).

The family conflict perspective is particularly noteworthy for showing that the nature of the communication between the parents is what influences the well-being of their children. It is reassuring to know that when divorced parents can effectively manage their conflict and maintain some semblance of civilized communication, the ill effects of parental conflict on children's adjustment are minimized (Linker, Stolberg, & Green, 1999). On the other hand, when parents' conflict escalates out of control and occurs in the presence of their children, maintaining such a marriage appears to do little to enhance the children's well-being. Such findings have prompted family scholars to conclude that "the impact of divorce on children may not be caused by divorce per se but rather by factors associated with divorce" (Gano-Phillips & Fincham, 1995, p. 207). Often these factors involve destructive communication patterns that precede divorce by many years.

THE EFFECTS OF PARENTAL DIVORCE ON ADULT WELL-BEING

Parental divorce does not just have an effect on young children. Research shows that the effects of parental divorce are still evident after children have grown into adults. This suggests something of a paradox. The effects of parental divorce on young children are rather weak in magnitude and tend to diminish as children become young adults. But then why would there still be noticeable negative effects for parental divorce among adults? The answer to this question may be found in a *sleeper effect*. A sleeper effect is a phenomenon that does not have a noticeable impact right away, but rather, its effect becomes evident at a later point in time. It has been suggested that the delayed effects of parental divorce show up when young adults face new developmental challenges such as developing a serious intimate relationship, establishing autonomy from parents, and pursuing a career (Hetherington, Law, O'Connor, 1993). Many of the findings on parental divorce and adulthood well-being are consistent with this explanation.

Research Findings

In addition to their meta-analysis on young children, Amato and Keith (1991b) also conducted a meta-analysis of the research literature on parental divorce and the well-being of adults over age 18. Their analysis covered 37 studies of over 85,000 adults. Similar to the

findings on children, they found that adults whose parents had been divorced had a lower level of well-being than those whose parents had not been divorced. Again, however, these effects were weak ($d = .15-.17$). Some of the domains of well-being for which there were strongest effects of parental divorce were adults' psychological adjustment, use of mental health services, conduct problems, and their own marital happiness. And once again the more recently conducted studies suggested a weakening of the effects of parental divorce. Many of the ill effects of parental divorce that are evident in studies of young children are also apparent in studies of older adults. Keep in mind that although these effects are pervasive, affecting many aspects of life, and chronic, they are not powerful. Amato recently characterized the effects of parental divorce on adult children's well-being by noting that "42% of children with divorced parents reach adulthood with a level of personal well-being higher than that of the average child from a two-parent family. In comparison, 42% of children with nondivorced parents reach adulthood with a level of subjective well-being lower than that of the average child from a divorced family" (Amato, 1999). So, the odds favor the person from the intact family, but not by a very large margin. At the bottom, most scientific evidence still supports the conclusion that the ill effects of parental divorce on children are not very strong or long lasting (Lansford, 2009).

Relations with Parents

One clear effect that parental divorce has on the family system is a disruption of the relationships between children and their parents. Young adults whose parents were divorced report less affection toward their mothers and fathers, than young adults whose parents are happily married (Booth & Amato, 1994). This effect is especially pronounced for fathers, presumably because so few children of divorce actually grew up living with their fathers. Even when divorce occurs later in life when the children are grown it reliably decreases contact between fathers and their children (Shapiro, 2003).

How does divorce disrupt the development of the parent-child relationship? To answer this question, it is instructive to look back to earlier childhood experiences in the family. Divorce tends to put increased responsibilities and tasks in the hands of adolescents, a phenomenon referred to as *parentification* (Hetherington, 1999; Jurkovic, Thirkield, & Morrell, 2001). Parentification is a sort of role reversal where children assume responsibilities for household tasks and the care of siblings (instrumental parentification) in addition to acting as confidant and provider of emotional support to the parent (emotional parentification). Parentification is most common in mother-daughter than other parent-child dyads (Maysseless, Bartholomew, Henderson, & Trinke, 2004). When parentification occurs, it is reasonable to assume that the child's needs do not get as much attention as those of children who live with both parents. Consequently, the affectionate bond that ordinarily develops between a child and a caring parent may be interfered with, leading to lower quality relations between the divorced parent and his or her adult child. After all, the mere presence of parentification suggests that the biological parent may be overburdened and unable to fully care for the child.

Divorce also has a tendency to create greater parent-child conflict (Kurdek & Fine, 1993) especially between single mothers and their sons (Brach, Camara, & Houser, 2000). Ironically, these same divorced parents engaged in more permissive parenting with their child (Kurek & Fine, 1993), a style that is notorious for producing less than optimal child outcomes. Increased conflict and a permissive parenting style indicative of low cohesion may contribute to a mild rift between the divorced parent and his or her child that would show up in the form of a more distant relationship between the two in adulthood. Conflict-laden interactions between parent and child could also contribute to the child's distress. In contrast, when children of divorced parents exhibit relational communication that is high in immediacy/affection, composure, interest/similarity, and receptivity/trust the children simultaneously report more effective coping with stressors (Affi, Huber, & Ohs, 2006).

Parental disclosure appears to be a key communication variable that influences the post-divorce parent–child relationship and child well-being. Both the depth and frequency of maternal disclosures about sensitive issues (i.e., financial concerns, negativity toward ex-husband, personal concerns) are positively associated with psychological distress among adolescent children of divorced parents (Koerner, Wallace, Lehman, Lee, & Escalante, 2004). When asked how they felt about these disclosures, the dominant reaction of divorced parents' children was frustration and/or distress. Because they perceive these disclosures to be annoying this communication behavior could certainly contribute to increased parent–child conflict after the divorce. Why do some divorced parents engage in inappropriate disclosures to their children? Some evidence shows that divorced parents are particularly likely to do this when they otherwise feel that they lack control over their divorce related stressors (Affi, McManus, Hutchinson, & Baker, 2007). This suggests that perhaps parents are venting to their children when they may feel that they are otherwise lacking an appropriate outlet for such communication. Unfortunately, this behavior is negatively associated with the well-being of their child (Affi et al., 2007).

One potential problem area for parent–child relationships after divorce is feeling caught (see also chapter 4). This occurs when children are put in between the disagreements of their parents and feel that they have to defend their loyalty to each parent (e.g., Affi & Schrodt, 2003). This sort of parent–child relationship dynamic is similar to the concept of “triangulation” from structural family theory (see chapter 4). Feeling caught between the two parents after a divorce appears to go hand in hand with feeling less closeness with parents and having less satisfying relationships with them (Affi & Schrodt, 2003). There is even some evidence that feeling caught may be harmful to the child's sense of well-being. In one study, children of divorced parents who felt caught also felt a greater need for protection (which stems from fear of having to demonstrate loyalty to each parent), and subsequently a greater sense of anxiety in laboratory conversations with one of their divorced parents (Affi et al., 2008). In contrast, Schrodt and Ledbetter (2007) did not find any evidence that feeling caught was associated with mental well-being in children of divorced parents, but they did find that observation of parental demand–withdrawal communication was a compelling predictor of feeling caught (see also Affi & Schrodt, 2003). In either event, feeling caught is one of the problem areas experienced in the parent-child relationship of some offspring of divorced parents and its effects on those relationships appear to be uniformly negative.

Researchers are now beginning to understand that divorce affects relations within the family system beyond just the parent-child relationship. When grandparents divorce, relationships with grandchildren also suffer (King, 2003). Similar to the effects of parental divorce, it is often the relationship with the grandfather that suffers the most. King (2003) found that one of the primary reasons for deteriorating grandparent–grandchild post-divorce relationships was a weakened bond between the grandparent and his or her adult child (i.e., the grandchild's parent) (see also chapter 9). The divorce of grandparents may forecast problems in the larger family system, even among family members who have yet to be born. Couples who divorce ultimately end up having grandchildren with greater marital discord and lower quality relationships with their mothers and fathers compared to family systems without divorce in the grandparent generation (Amato & Cheadle, 2005). Amato and Cheadle (2005) refer to this effect as “the long reach of divorce.” Divorce in the parental generation also appears to sometimes weaken bonds with grandparents. When parents divorce and the child's relationship with his or her father becomes more distant, relations with paternal grandparents also become more distant and negative (Ahrons, 2007).

The Intergenerational Transmission of Divorce

One of the most commonly cited effects of parental divorce on adult children is an increased risk for marital distress and divorce. This is known as the intergenerational transmission of

divorce and ought to be a phenomenon of considerable interest and importance to students of communication. In a group of adults followed over a period of 12 years, the divorce rate was 10% among those couples with no history of parental divorce (Amato, 1996). This rate was closer to 15% if either the husband or the wife had been exposed to a parental divorce. When both the husband and wife had divorced parents, the divorce rate was close to 30%.

Why do parents “pass on” the tendency to divorce to their children? Perhaps the most compelling account of this phenomenon can be found in social learning theory (Bandura, 1977, see also chapter 2). Recall that according to social learning theory, people learn attitudes and behaviors through *modeling*. Modeling allows people to vicariously learn behaviors by observing others perform them. Two hypotheses that could be derived from this theory are that children learn (in)effective marital communication skills by observing their own parents, and that children learn an attitude of (non)commitment to marriage by observing their parents.

Convincing evidence of the poor marital communication skills hypothesis can be found in a study by Sanders, Halford, and Behrens (1999) who studied 93 couples that were planning to marry within the next 12 months. They came to the research laboratory and participated in a 10 minute conversation about a topic that was a source of disagreement and conflict in their relationship, in addition to filling out several self-report measures about their relationship. The results indicated that couples in which the woman’s parents had been divorced exhibited more disagreement, conflict, criticism, and invalidation during their interaction, and less self-disclosure and fewer proposals of positive solutions than other couples in the study. After the conversations were over, members of the couples watched the videotape of their conversation and were asked to write down their thoughts during each 30 second interval. Again, for couples in which the woman’s parents had divorced, there were fewer positive thoughts about the partner recorded during this post-interaction thought listing, relative to the other couples. There are two noteworthy aspects of these results. First, they show that parental divorce, at least for women, has an effect that is apparent in the communication behaviors of *both* members of the couple as they attempt to resolve a conflict. Second, they suggest that the effects of parental divorce on adults’ communication skills are more pronounced for women. Sanders et al. (1999) argue that this may be because girls are more likely to have first hand experience with the adversity associated with their mothers’ divorces as a result of living with them after the divorce, whereas boys are far less likely to have a lot of exposure to the modeling of their fathers, post-divorce.

At least one other study indicates that parental divorce is associated with greater communication problems in young adults’ own intimate relationships (Herzog & Cooney, 2002). Once again, this study showed that when broken down by sex, the effect only held for females whose parents had been divorced. Herzog and Cooney’s (2002) findings implicated parental conflict as the culprit in young adults’ problems with intimate communication—regardless of whether their parents had been divorced. Intense parental conflict and poorly resolved parental conflict patterns were associated with more problematic intimate communication for these young adults. A similar pattern of associations between conflict in the family of origin and relational communication problems was found by Levy, Wamboldt, and Fiese (1997) in their laboratory analysis of dating couples’ conflict resolution interactions.

The idea that children learn dysfunctional communication patterns from observing their parents’ interactions is consistent with findings indicating that marital discord is transmitted intergenerationally (Amato & Booth, 2001). In a 17-year longitudinal study Amato and Booth (2001) found that parents’ marital discord (when the children were on average 13 years old) was predictive of their offspring’s later marital discord (when the offspring were on average 30 years old). Some refined analyses showed that it was the presence of interpersonal problems in the parents’ marriages such as conflict, problems, and instability that predicted children’s later marital discord. The authors suggest that direct observation of parent’s dysfunctional interpersonal interactions may create a predisposition for children to enact those same problem behaviors in their later marriages.

In addition to modeling poor marital communication skills, divorcing parents may also inadvertently model attitudes and beliefs toward marriage which suggest that marriages can, and perhaps should, be left when they become distressed. Amato and DeBoer (2001) tested this hypothesis by following 355 married adults and their parents over a period of 17 years. They found that parental divorce almost doubled the odds that the offspring would experience a divorce in their own marriages. Their analyses also suggested that children might learn that marriage is not permanent by observing their parents' divorce. In this study parental divorce was associated with a much higher likelihood of offspring divorce, even when parents' pre-divorce levels of discord were statistically controlled. This shows that the act of divorce contributes something above and beyond mere interparental conflict toward increasing the odds of offspring divorce. However, high levels of interparental conflict, even after the divorce, have been shown to predict less positive attitudes toward marriage among the children of divorced parents (Dennison & Koerner, 2006). In a related investigation, premarital couples exposed to parental divorce had weaker beliefs in the feasibility of lifelong marriage and weaker beliefs in their partner's ability to make the relationship work (Segrin & Taylor, 2006). The offspring of divorced parents often exhibit lower levels of commitment to and confidence in their relationship (Whitton, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2008). One might therefore surmise that parental divorce undermines the commitment to a lifelong marriage in children who observe their parents dissolving their marriage in times of trouble. In other words, children learn from their parents that divorce is a viable option for resolving marital problems, and the conflict that often accompanies marriage appears to turn these children off somewhat to the idea of marriage.

There is clear evidence that negative attitudes toward the permanence of marriage can explain the intergenerational transmission of divorce (Segrin, Taylor, & Altman, 2003). In this study Segrin and his colleagues found that people whose parents had been divorced were about one and a half times as likely to have been divorced themselves compared to people whose parents had not divorced. However, when statistically controlling for negative attitudes toward marriage, this significant intergenerational transmission of divorce effect was rendered statistically nonsignificant. This implies that parental divorce contributes to the increased likelihood of offspring divorce through the negative attitudes toward a lifelong marriage that are presumably learned through observation.

Before leaving the topic of the intergenerational transmission of divorce, we should note that most people who observe a parental divorce also observe considerable family conflict in the process. Indeed, this is a core element of the communication skills deficit hypothesis mentioned earlier in this section (i.e., children of divorced parents learn dysfunctional communication and conflict management skills through observing their parents). In addition to inadvertently teaching poor communication skills, the family conflict that accompanies parental divorce might actually corrupt certain mate selection processes among offspring. At least among women, exposure to high levels of interparental conflict is associated with a greater likelihood of marrying a man who was previously divorced (Hanzal & Segrin, 2008). This finding conforms to the more general hypothesis that children from high-conflict and divorced homes often put their later marriages at risk through poor mate selection (Booth & Edwards, 1992). So it is not just the acquisition of poor communication skills that could explain the intergenerational transmission of divorce, but also more negative attitudes toward lifelong marriage, and possibly less judicious mate selection as well.

THE PROCESS OF DIVORCE

People often think of and talk about divorce as a discrete event. Common statements like "I got divorced two years ago" and "I'm still waiting for my divorce to go through" give the impression that a divorce happens at a specific point in time, usually at a court hearing.

However, social scientists generally agree that divorce is best understood as a process that gradually unfolds (Demo et al., 2000). This process is lucidly conveyed in many different stage models that have been developed to illustrate how marriages, and close relationships more generally, come apart (e.g., Duck, 1982; Guttman, 1993; Knapp & Vangelisti, 2000).

One of the more widely recognized stage models of divorce was developed by Bohannon (1970), and is referred to as the six stations of divorce. According to Bohannon, the first step, or station, in the divorce process is the *emotional divorce*. At this stage, spouses experience a change in feelings toward their partner. They tend to be dissatisfied, withdraw from interaction, and experience depression and loneliness. People at this stage will often invest themselves in their work or relationships with other friends or even in substance abuse in order to soothe their negative emotional states. Evidence of the emotional divorce can be found in some of the final stages of Gottman's distance and isolation cascade toward divorce (loneliness) or in the behavioral cascade model (stonewalling). Gottman (1999) notes that many couples who show up for marital therapy actually end up getting divorced because they have waited too long to seek help. Often distressed couples will seek therapy years after their problems began. The fact that many of these couples end up getting divorced suggests that they may have already passed through the emotional divorce station before seeking help.

In the next stage, the *legal divorce*, partners pursue the legal dissolution of their marriage. Ironically, this state might demand more communication between the spouses than the emotional divorce stage because they have to negotiate issues of child custody, division of property, support payments, and so forth. There is also a degree of permanence and irreversibility at the legal divorce stage that makes it different from the emotional divorce. One potential difficulty for couples at the legal divorce stage is the exposure of the marriage's problems to outsiders. Because of the need for filing court papers, consulting attorneys or mediators, or seeking other counsel, couples are more or less forced to bring outsiders into the picture at this stage. For people struggling with shame, embarrassment, or feelings of failure, this social expansion of the divorce process can be very challenging. Another potential problem faced at this stage is a lack of agreement between spouses about officially pursuing a divorce. Non-initiators of divorce will sometimes actively resist moving forward with a divorce by expressing commitment and alignment, which is trying to increase the perception of "couplehood" with both the initiator of the divorce and other social network members (Buchanan, O'Hair, & Becker, 2006).

According to Bohannon, the third stage of divorce is the *economic divorce*. Here the partners must divide up their financial assets and negotiate what, if any, future economic arrangements will be made (e.g., alimony, child support). This stage almost always starts simultaneous to the legal divorce, but it rarely ends at the same time as the legal divorce. This is because divorce settlements often involve issues of future earnings, a spouse's pension or social security benefits, and child support payments. For this reason, the economic divorce has the potential to last for decades and to be very stressful. Parents in post-divorce families describe finances as their most common stressor (Affi, Hutchinson, & Krouse, 2006).

Around the same time as the legal divorce is initiated, spouses must address the *co-parental divorce*. Of course, this stage only applies to those couples with children. Like the economic divorce, the co-parental divorce can be fraught with difficulties and obstacles. Both legal custody (who has legal responsibility for the child) and physical custody (who the child lives with) must be negotiated. Sole custody involves the child living with one parent, who has legal responsibility, often with court-ordered child support payments from the non-custodial parent. The non-custodial parent will often have visitation rights that allow him or her to spend time with the child at regular intervals of time (e.g., weekends). In the case of particularly troubled parents, these visitations may be supervised by officers of the court or state. Joint custody arrangements occur when both parents share legal and physical custody. In such cases, the child literally lives in two households, perhaps spending certain days of the week with the father and other days with the mother. Joint custody sounds attractive, but has obstacles of its own, not

the least of which involves perpetually moving children back and forth between two households. This demands exquisite cooperation between the now-divorced parents. Recent findings show that such efforts may be particularly worthwhile as children living in a joint custody arrangement are significantly better adjusted than children with a sole-custody parent, and they are as well adjusted as children from intact families (Bauserman, 2002).

This co-parental stage of divorce can also present substantial threats to parents' face, or self-image (Miller, 2009). Divorced co-parents often express concerns that they might be seen as bad parents or that they abandoned the family. In addition, the divorce sometimes limits their parenting choices (i.e., efforts to be involved in their child's life force them to be in contact with their divorced spouses, who they would often rather avoid) and creates the threat of "replacement" via the co-parent's new dating partner (Miller, 2009). Accordingly, divorced parents have a number of threatening and sensitive issues to work around in their communication after the divorce. The ability to maintain effective post-divorce communication between co-parents is a significant predictor of how many times they have to return to court, presumably to settle differences over child custody, child support payments, and so forth (Malcore, Windell, Seyuin, & Hill, 2010). Like the economic divorce, the co-parental divorce has the potential to last for years beyond the legal divorce and communication still plays a very important role between the former spouses at this stage.

The *community divorce* is another distinct stage. It occurs when the divorcing partners share the news of their divorce with their social networks. There is great variability in when and to whom people feel comfortable making this proclamation. There is still a degree of stigma attached to divorce and people may not be comfortable sharing the news of their divorce with others. For this reason, some people may not reach this stage until after the legal divorce. On the other hand, some may experience the community divorce long before the legal divorce. Regardless of when this stage is experienced, social networks are bound to change as a result of the community divorce. Commonly, relationships with in-laws and close friends of the ex-spouse tend to dissipate at this stage.

Finally, the *psychic divorce* happens when members of the marriage reach a state of psychological closure on their marriage. They no longer think of themselves as married and now accept that they are single. For most divorcing couples, this is likely to be the final and perhaps most difficult stage in the divorce process. Like the economic or co-parental divorce, the psychic divorce has the potential to carry on for long periods of time for some people. Especially when children are involved and it is necessary to still interact with the ex-spouse, it may be extremely difficult to reach a sense of closure on the relationship. Divorces that are not mutually agreed upon or desired may leave one spouse with an unrequited sense of attachment to his or her former partner and/or a sense of consuming anger. These emotions can foreclose opportunities for post-divorce relational development, thereby trapping people in what is effectively the emotional divorce stage.

CONCLUSION

Divorce is a very common family stressor that has pervasive and long-lasting implications for the family system. Societal factors such as individualism and women's greater occupational achievements and earnings, individual factors like income, education, and age, and premarital relationship factors such as pregnancy and cohabitation, all contribute to the propensity to divorce. At the same time, communication patterns within the marriage appear to be as powerful, if not more so, at predicting who will divorce. Many of these communication patterns are evident before couples even marry. Much of the evidence linking communication patterns to divorce focuses on how couples handle disagreements and conflicts. Certain destructive communication behaviors such as contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling appear to lay the groundwork for subsequent divorce. It is clear that the sheer amount of conflict is not a

good predictor of divorce. Rather, the key issue appears to be how much negativity there is in the couple's interactions relative to how much positivity there is. So long as the negative interactions are disproportionately balanced with positive ones, married couples can tolerate a considerable degree of conflict and disagreement in their relationship.

As the divorce rate increased dramatically between the 1960s and 1980s social scientists responded with answers to many of the questions about how and why people get divorced. Time and again, marital communication patterns seem to play a vital role in marital disruption or longevity. Unfortunately, this knowledge has yet to stem the tide of divorce. It is still relatively easy to find couples that choose to marry despite obvious signs of trouble from the word go. It is even easier to find marriages that started out with great promise and optimism but eventually succumbed to disillusionment and disappointment. Perhaps the problem is that most of the individual and societal factors that are implicated in divorce are difficult, if not impossible, to change. Communication patterns and style of interaction can be changed, but there must be motivation to do so. One of the great challenges to family scholars and therapists alike is to figure out how to harness and preserve the motivation that couples start out with and to help them identify and correct their destructive communication behaviors while the marriage is still salvageable.

Divorce touches members of the family system beyond just husbands and wives. Children are negatively affected by parental divorce, and many of these negative effects are still present when they reach adulthood. However, these effects are weak in magnitude. Relationships between parent and child and grandparents and grandchildren also suffer as a result of divorce. Above all else, it is important to realize that not all people respond to divorce in the same way. Divorce is a process, and each divorce process is somewhat unique in its effect on spouses, children, and social network members. As sociologist Paul Amato concluded, "Divorce benefits some individuals, leads others to experience temporary decrements in well-being that improve over time, and forces others on a downward cycle from which they never fully recover" (Amato, 2000, p. 1282). Undoubtedly, these differing outcomes are influenced to a large extent by the nature of the communication within and beyond the family system before, during, and after the divorce process.

13 Renegotiating Family Communication

Remarriage and Stepfamilies

When many people think of “family” they imagine two people getting married, having children, and growing old together. This image of the American family is perhaps more stereotypical than it is typical. Because of divorce and widowhood many people will get married more than once in their lifetime. When people with children remarry they create a stepfamily. However, not all stepfamilies are formed after divorce or widowhood. More people are having children outside marriage and if these people eventually marry a different partner, their first marriage will generate a stepfamily. Remarriages and stepfamilies face all of the same challenges as first marriages and their associated families. However, remarriages and stepfamilies appear to have their own unique qualities and burdens that distinguish them from first marriage families. Communication and relationship development issues in stepfamilies have a different character than what might be observed in first marriage families. Even though there has been a lot of attention to the negative aspects of remarriage and stepfamilies, there is reason to believe that they enjoy many of the benefits of first marriage families, and that their relationships are not necessarily more troubled.

We begin this chapter by briefly examining the phenomenon of remarriage and answering a common question, “Why is it that marriage does not always work out better the second time around?” Next we present an in depth analysis of communication and relationships in stepfamilies. We address questions such as “How are stepfamilies portrayed in the media?” and “What are societal views of stepfamilies?” These views and images are mostly negative and are not accurate representations of the complex realities of stepfamilies. Next, we take on questions such as “How do stepfamily relationships and communication develop in the early years of stepfamily formation?” “What do stepfamilies talk about in their day to day interactions?” and “How are roles and relationships defined in different types of stepfamilies?” We then present a variety of typologies of stepfamily defined, for example, on the basis of the children’s perceptions of family relationships and development patterns. Finally, “What are the challenges that are particular to stepfamilies with regard to communication, conflict, and adaptability and cohesion?” Addressing this question leads us to consider research findings on child adjustment in stepfamilies and the importance of stepfamily communication for child well-being. Above all else, the research reviewed in this chapter shows that stepfamilies are exceptionally diverse. There are many different types of stepfamilies, and these are represented in numerous taxonomies and typologies of stepfamilies that have been developed by family scientists. Obviously, with all of the various forms and functions in stepfamilies, sweeping generalizations must be interpreted tentatively.

REMARRIED COUPLES’ RELATIONSHIPS

For the majority of people, divorce or widowhood does not mark the end of married life. Most people whose marriages end before they reach the age of 60 remarry eventually.

Consequently, about half of all marriages are remarriages for at least one of the partners (Bumpass et al., 1990). About three-quarters of all divorced people eventually remarry (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). Also, remarriage is becoming a more popular trend in society. For example, 10.6% of men in their 40s who were born between 1925 and 1934 were married two or more times. However, 22.3% of men in their 40s who were born between 1945 and 1954 have been married two or more times (Kreider & Fields, 2002). The corresponding figures for women are 12.1% and 22.8%. The median time span between divorce and remarriage is 3 years (Kreider & Fields). This suggests that people do not move into remarriages with greater caution, as evidenced by longer courtships, than people embarking on their first marriage. Remarriages also have a higher divorce rate than first marriages (see chapter 12), and that risk for divorce is especially pronounced when women bring children into their second marriage (Teachman, 2008).

Why is it that people do not “learn from their past mistakes” and experience more success in remarriages than they did in marriage the first time around? Ganong and Coleman (1994) explain that there are multiple reasons for the higher divorce rate of remarried couples that involve a complex mix of individual, interpersonal, and societal factors. For starters, Ganong and Coleman suggest that some people have qualities that make them likely candidates for divorce. This is known as the *divorce-prone personality hypothesis*. Imagine a spouse who is very argumentative. That behavior might be perceived as obnoxious and eventually contribute to deterioration of the marriage. Should this argumentative spouse remarry, the same behaviors and traits are now transported into the new marriage and would be expected to aggravate the new spouse and corrode that relationship as well. According to the *training school hypothesis* first marriages are training grounds for relationships in subsequent marriages. However, as we noted earlier, people do not seem to learn from past mistakes. Rather, the most likely version of the training school hypothesis is that people learn dysfunctional patterns of interaction and problem solving in their first marriages and bring these dysfunctional tendencies into their subsequent marriages (Ganong & Coleman). In other words, people can develop bad habits in one marriage and continue them in another. The *willingness to leave marriage hypothesis* simply states that people who divorce have an obvious track record for seeing divorce as a solution to marital problems. If divorce was a way of escaping marital problems once, it should operate similarly in subsequent marriages. Because divorced people often marry other divorced people (Wilson & Clarke, 1992), this phenomenon may be compounded by both spouses having more favorable attitudes toward divorce. Another individual-level explanation described by Ganong and Coleman is the *dysfunctional beliefs hypothesis*. According to this explanation, people enter into remarriage with unrealistically high expectations, perhaps fueled by the certainty that they have learned from their past mistakes. When these expectations are not met, the remarried relationship is dissolved. At a more societal level, the *remarriage market hypothesis* predicts that the selection of available mates is often not as good the second or third time around. Divorced people in search of a future spouse may feel that “all of the good ones are taken.” Those who are available may not have all of the desired qualities and thus contribute to lower quality marriages. Like so many social phenomena, the higher rate of divorce among remarried relationships is probably influenced by a variety of factors, at least some of which suggest that there are often troubles in these relationships.

Despite the multiple compelling explanations for the higher dissolution rate of second marriages, lower satisfaction does not seem to be a major problem for remarriages. A meta-analysis of 34 studies revealed that people in first marriages were just slightly more satisfied with their marriage than those in remarriages (Vemer, Coleman, Ganong, & Cooper, 1989). The magnitude of the difference was so weak that it could not plausibly account for the higher divorce rate among remarried people. In addition to comparable levels of happiness, Skinner et al. (2002) found that remarried couples reported a similar amount of couple communication and disagreements in their relationships as first married or cohabiting couples. It is also the case that just as in first marriages, spouses’ communication skills are good predictors of satisfaction

in remarriages (Beaudry, Boisvert, Simard, Parent, & Blais, 2004). Yet other studies show that remarried couples have more open expressions of anger, criticism, and irritation (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington, 1993). A comparison of the problem solving discussions of first-time versus remarried couples showed that the remarried couples used less positive communication (e.g., problem description, propose a positive solution) and were more withdrawn from their interactions than first-time married couples (Halford, Nicholson, & Sanders, 2007). However, these same remarried couples were less negative in their communication (e.g., disagree, criticize) than their first marriage counterparts. Remarried couples also see their partners as being more compliant and unassertive in conflicts when compared to first-marriage couples (Hanzal & Segrin, 2008). This suggests that some remarried couples might approach problem discussions with more withdrawal, tentativeness, or even compliance than first-time married couples. It is understandable why a history of divorce could prompt such hesitancy to aggressively engage in conflict discussions.

There is some reason to believe that some of the variability in marital quality among remarried couples might be explainable by the presence or absence of children in the remarried household (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). It seems that opportunities for conflict, anger, and resentment are greater when there are stepchildren in the home. This idea is underscored by the fact that the marital satisfaction of remarried wives is undermined by perceptions that their stepchildren cause problems in their current marriage (Knox & Zusman, 2001). Also, boundary ambiguity in stepfamilies—uncertainty about who is in and who is not in the “family”—is negatively associated with wives’ relationship satisfaction and positively associated with their estimated probability of separating from their partner (Stewart, 2005). For men, the more stepchildren they acquire through remarriage, the more difficulty they report in their role as stepparent (Beaudry et al., 2004). So for both husbands and wives, stepchildren can be a source of stress that can potentially spill over and impact the quality of the marriage itself.

Adjustment to remarriage is positively related to the extended interpersonal relationships that come with that marriage (Roberts & Price, 1989). The better remarried spouses’ relationships are with the couple’s families and friends, the better their marital adjustment. Not surprisingly, the quality of these same relationships is also associated with the quality of the remarried couple’s own communication. However, there is one interpersonal relationship that predictably interferes with remarried couples’ adjustment, and that is a relationship with the former spouse. Attachment to the former spouse interferes with marital adjustment and satisfaction among remarried couples (Buunk & Mutsaers, 1999; Roberts & Price, 1989).

One obvious difference between remarried and first marriage relationships is that there is a former spouse in remarried relationships. The act of getting married for a second or third time not only initiates a new marital relationship, it also transforms the relationship with the former spouse (Christensen & Rettig, 1995). Christensen and Rettig found that single parents participated in substantial co-parenting (e.g., collectively making decisions about the child, discussing the child’s problems), but those who had remarried were far less involved with their former spouse in terms of parenting issues. Additionally, remarried parents reported less parental support from their former spouse and held more negative attitudes toward their former spouse. Despite the seemingly negative tone of these transformations in the relationships with the former spouse, they are probably functional in some ways by creating the psychological space in which people can form a connection with a new spouse. Recall that attachments to the former spouse can interfere with the adjustment of remarried couples.

Overall, remarriages have been characterized as both a stressor (Crosbie-Burnett & McClintic, 2000a) and a coping response to the stress of being alone (Gentry & Shulman, 1988). Remarriages that have low levels of marital conflict and high levels of marital satisfaction can bring happiness to spouses and protect against depression (Demo & Acock, 1996). Unfortunately, the high divorce rate in remarriages suggests that the “remarriage as stressor” view is accurate in many cases.

COMMUNICATION AND STEPFAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Stepfamilies are quite common in American society. About 30% of all children will live with a stepparent before reaching adulthood (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995). It is estimated that 1 in 3 Americans is presently a member of a stepfamily and that more than half of all Americans will be a part of a stepfamily at some point in their lives (Larson, 1992). Stepfamilies are also nothing new. American presidents George Washington and Abraham Lincoln each had stepfamilies. There are a lot of different terms for stepfamilies including *remarried families*, *blended families*, *bi-nuclear families*, *second families*, and *reconstituted families*, to name but a few (e.g., Bray, 1999; Ganong & Coleman, 1997, 2000). There is something particularly interesting about concepts that are referenced by multiple terms, (e.g., “crippled,” “handicapped,” “disabled”). People often look for different terms when they are somehow uneasy with the concept, or when they feel there is some stigma associated with it. Presumably it is easier to change the label than to change thinking about the concept. Stepfamilies have received a bad reputation in our culture, for reasons that we will get into shortly. However, stepfamilies are as diverse as families more generally, so broad generalizations about their harm or helpfulness are often difficult to support.

Consider some of the different ways in which stepfamilies might be formed. People often think of stepfamilies that are initiated after divorce from a first marriage. That is one of well over a dozen different ways that a stepfamily could be formed. Some people may not find themselves in a stepfamily until they reach their 30s and 40s if an older parent remarries following the death of his or her spouse. Some people may have had children outside marriage and then decide to marry someone other than the biological parent of the children. For both spouses this could be their first marriage, yet one would be a stepparent. The common denominator in all of these cases is that one adult parent has a legal or genetic tie to a child that the other adult does not (Ganong & Coleman, 2000). When these two unite, they form a stepfamily. When only one of the adults has children prior to remarriage, they form what is sometimes referred to as a *simple stepfamily*. When both have children from previous relationships, they form a *complex stepfamily*. Complex stepfamilies have a higher likelihood of divorce (Coleman et al., 2000).

Views of Stepfamilies

In Box 13.1, we examine how stepfamilies are portrayed in the media. Later in this section, we explore portrayals of stepfamilies in society more generally.

Box 13.1 Images of Stepfamilies in the Media

Images of Stepfamilies in the Media

Family scientists Lawrence Ganong and Marilyn Coleman remarked that “cultural beliefs about family life exert a strong influence on the ways in which people conduct themselves, evaluate their situations, and expect to be regarded by others” (Ganong & Coleman, 1994, p. 85). Numerous family scholars have argued that stepfamilies tend to have a bad reputation, due in part to their portrayal in the media (e.g., Berstein, 1999; Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Although there has been virtually no scientific study of the effects of stepfamily portrayals in the media, it is worthwhile to at least momentarily consider how stepfamilies are depicted in stories, movies, and television, and how that might influence both society’s and individuals’ beliefs, attitudes, and expectations for stepfamilies.

Without doubt, the dominant media image of stepfamily that is referenced in scholarly essays comes from the story *Cinderella* which was made into a popular film in 1950. It was *Cinderella* that popularized the “wicked stepmother” image. Other fairy tales such as *Sleeping Beauty*, *Snow White*, and *Hansel and Gretel* reinforced this often dim view of stepparents. Negative portrayals of stepfamily life, and stepparents in particular, have continued in earnest since *Cinderella*. Films such as *Table for Five* (1983), *See You in the Morning* (1989), *Radio Flyer* (1992), *This Boy’s Life* (1993), *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1996), *Promise to Caroline* (1996), *Enchanted* (2007), *Georgia Rule* (2007), and *Chickadee* (2010) continue to depict stepparents as mean, and sometimes abusive, and stepfamily life as dysfunctional. Among films that depict stepfamily life, about three quarters have a generally negative or mixed tone, and about half portray stepchildren resenting their stepparents (Leon & Angst, 2005). The abundance of such storylines illustrates that there is a long history of negative images of stepfamilies in American media.

With that said, it would be inaccurate to say that media images of stepfamilies are uniformly negative. A number of dramatic films such as *The Sound of Music* (1965), *Tender Mercies* (1983), *Sarah Plain and Tall* (1990), and *Stepmom* (1998) depict stepparent–stepchild relationships in a much more positive light, sometimes portraying extraordinary caring and kindness on the part of stepparents. Other films such as *Yours Mine and Ours* (1968/2005), *With 6 You Get Eggroll* (1968), *Seems Like Old Times* (1980), *Murphy’s Romance* (1985), *My Stepmother is an Alien* (1988), *The Brady Bunch Movie* (1995), *Tadpole* (2002), and *Mama’s Boy* (2007) present a comedic view of stepfamilies. Furthermore, television portrayals of stepfamilies have been almost exclusively positive, as evidenced by shows such as *The Brady Bunch* (1969–1974), *Eight is Enough* (1977–1981), *Major Dad* (1989–1993), *Hearts Afire* (1992–1995), and *Step by Step* (1991–1998), although more recent programs such as *Once and Again* (1999–2002) have tackled some of the more difficult issues that face contemporary stepfamilies. For many Americans under the age of 50, it would be difficult to overstate the potential impact of *The Brady Bunch*. This program was first aired 40 years ago and has continued to be broadcast in syndication virtually without interruption. When family scholars discuss the role of unrealistically positive expectations in stepfamily adjustment (e.g., Jones, 1978), images of *The Brady Bunch* and similarly positive portrayals such as *The Sound of Music* immediately come to mind. However, the general belief of media cultivation theorists is that the media does not cause changes in views of the family but rather reflects and reinforces, or cultivates, already established beliefs (Signorelli & Morgan, 2001).

Despite the presence of both negative and positive images of stepfamilies in the media, on balance, their depiction on television is relatively rare. Robinson and Skill (2001) content analyzed prime time fictional TV shows with a family configuration. In the 1950s, only 1.2% of these shows featured stepfamilies. By the period 1990–1995 this figure had risen to 6.0% a considerable increase, but still far below their prevalence in the actual American population.

The media has been blamed for simultaneously depicting overly negative views of stepfamilies and stepparents in particular, as well as portraying unrealistically positive images of stepfamilies. Overall, depictions of stepfamilies on television and in the movies are still relatively rare, but in some cases very salient and accessible. The exact role of these media images in shaping cultural as well as individual attitudes toward stepfamilies is still largely unknown to family scientists.

Family scientists have argued that most societal views of stepfamilies are negative in tone and based on an idealization of nuclear families (Ganong & Coleman, 2000). For instance, one image of stepfamilies in society is that of *deviant group*. Because stepfamilies and stepparents are sometimes stigmatized through cultural stereotypes, myths, and media images, Ganong and Coleman (2000) argue that many people see them as deviant groups. Consequently, stepfamily members sometimes attempt to conceal their status or engage in deliberate impression management strategies to overcome the stigma and prove that they are a worthwhile family. Another prominent view of stepfamilies is evident in the *incomplete institutionalization hypothesis* (Cherlin, 1978). Cherlin's thesis is essentially that stepfamilies lack guiding norms, principles, and methods of problem solving that are enjoyed by members of nuclear families. Further, there is no institutionalized social support for stepfamilies. In some cases, there are not even any appropriate terms for certain step relationships (e.g., the sibling of a stepparent). For these reasons, stepfamilies do not get adequately incorporated into our institutions and have to function under conditions of unclear or ambiguous expectations. Ganong and Coleman (2000) are quick to note that some have criticized Cherlin for overstating the case, but that there is at least a kernel of truth in the incomplete institutionalization hypothesis. About 40% of parents and adolescent children in stepfamilies list the parent's remarriage as a major source of stress (Afifi, Hutchinson, & Krouse, 2006). Another societal view of stepfamilies is that of the *reformed nuclear family*. According to this perspective, stepfamilies are just like nuclear families by virtue of having two heterosexual adults and children. People who endorse this view assume that stepfamilies will function as any nuclear family would and that family membership and household membership are one and the same. This societal view of stepfamilies certainly sounds less negative than the incomplete institutionalization hypothesis or the deviant groups perspective, but it is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of stepfamilies. As we will reveal later in this chapter, stepfamilies face their own unique set of challenges that often distinguish them from nuclear families. And like nuclear families, stepfamilies have diverse forms and functions. For that reason the reformed nuclear family view appears to stem from a white-washed vision of what stepfamilies are all about. At the same time, we hasten to point out that the deviant groups and incomplete institutionalization perspectives are perhaps equally off base, just in the opposite direction. In any event, the societal views of stepfamilies described by Ganong and Coleman (2000) indicate that myths and stereotypes abound when it comes to understanding stepfamilies.

The Development of Stepfamily Communication and Relationships

Family clinicians such as Papernow (1993) recognize that stepfamilies go through distinct phases in their efforts to form a cohesive "family." At the start of the remarriage, many stepfamilies are in the *fantasy stage*. This stage is represented by hope and perhaps expectation that the new spouse will be a better partner and parent than the previous spouse. The spouse who marries a partner with children will often enter into the relationship with similarly lofty goals and an immediate effort to be a super-parent. The image of stepfamilies portrayed in *The Brady Bunch* is a good illustration of the sort of family communication dynamics that might be hoped for in the fantasy stage. However, as most people are aware, that image of stepfamily life is just that—a fantasy. Next, stepfamilies enter into the *immersion stage*. In this stage, the stepparent tends to feel like an outsider looking in and his/her grand expectations are often shattered. Children become more aware of the relationship between their biological parent and stepparent. This can generate feelings of jealousy, resentment, and confusion. The reality of different views toward childrearing, parental roles, and negotiation of new boundaries creates conditions that are ripe for family conflict.

The transformation from the fantasy to immersion stages described by Papernow (1993) is clearly evident in research findings on stepfathers and their stepchildren. Stepfathers often enter the stepfamily with what appear to be the best of intentions, overtly expressing positivity

toward the stepchildren in the hope of developing a good relationship with them. However, research shows that they quickly become disengaged from the stepchildren when their positive overtures are rebuffed (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Despite the fact that sharing information with the children, paying attention to them, and engaging them in shared activities are all positive rapport-building communication behaviors, stepfamily relationships like all other relationships cannot be forced or rushed. Children have a knack for putting on the brakes when stepparent–stepchild relationships develop too quickly. This regulation of relationship development may be interpreted by the stepfather as rejection, resulting in his disengagement from the relationship. This pattern of early stepfamily relationship development clearly illustrates the sort of changes in behavior that would be expected as stepfamilies progress from the fantasy into the immersion stage.

Everyday Talk in Stepfamilies

A great deal of insight into stepfamily life and how it is similar to or different from first marriage families can be gained by examining their ordinary, day to day interactions. Communication researcher Paul Schrodt and his associates have taken up this seemingly straightforward, but surprisingly understudied task. In an investigation of 144 adult stepchildren and their parents and stepparents, Schrodt et al. (2007) found that the most common type of talk was catching up, joking around, and recapping the day's events. In this regard, family interactions in stepfamily households seem a lot like those of first marriage families. However, Schrodt et al. also discovered that stepchildren clearly engaged in a higher frequency of everyday talk with their residential parent than either their stepparent or nonresidential parent, showing that there are lines of demarcation when it comes to communication in stepfamilies that might not otherwise be evident in first marriage families.

Even though it is common to think of everyday talk like catching up and joking around as inconsequential, it may be a good proxy for the quality of the stepchild–stepparent relationship. The quantity of this sort of everyday talk is positively associated with young adults' and stepparents' satisfaction with their relationship (Schrodt, Soliz, & Braithwaite, 2008). This everyday talk and relationship satisfaction are both interpersonal processes that are best understood as qualities of the particular stepchild–stepparent relationship, rather than an overall family dynamic as a whole (Schrodt et al.). In other words, how much everyday talk is exchanged and how much relationship satisfaction is felt tends to be more of a function of the particular relationship between the stepchild and his/her stepparent than the larger family environment. This implies that both good and not so good stepparent–stepchild relationships can develop in ways that are somewhat independent of the overall family atmosphere.

Dialectic Tensions in Stepfamily Relationships

The dialectic perspective discussed in chapter 2 explained how social life is full of contradictions, oppositions, and tensions that must be managed. Communication researchers Dawn Braithwaite and Leslie Baxter have been extensively investigating and documenting such dialectics in stepfamily life. Thus far, their research points to unique sets of dialectic tensions in the areas of family rituals, communication between the child and his/her nonresidential parent, and the child's quest to be centered, but not caught in the middle in the stepfamily.

The development of stepfamily relationships is often evident in how the family negotiates and develops family rituals. To explore this issue, communication researchers investigated family rituals during the first four years of the stepfamily's history (Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998). They found that families had to balance the dialectical opposition between honoring rituals of the “old” family and developing rituals in the “new” family. This management was accomplished in several ways. First, some rituals from the old family were dropped because they could no longer be performed in the new family, they were no longer appropriate,

or because the new spouse would not participate in the new ritual. It is sometimes the case that family rituals are built around one person (e.g., going to a certain restaurant on the father's birthday) and when that person is no longer a part of the household the ritual is dropped. In other cases, the new spouse may have different religious beliefs and practices that are at odds with the family's adherence to a former ritual. Second, some rituals were successfully imported unchanged into the new family. Braithwaite and her colleagues explain that the perseverance of such rituals functions to honor both the old and the new family. For example, a family that goes on a camping trip every summer might continue to do so after the remarriage of one of the parents. In this way they keep the "old family" tradition alive, while also incorporating the new family member(s) into that tradition, ultimately making it the "new family's" ritual as well. Third, some family rituals are imported into the new family but adapted in some way. A family that always gets together for an afternoon barbeque on the 4th of July might have to modify their ritual when their new stepmother, who is a police officer, has to work on that day. Instead, this family may have a dinner and then go to their local park to watch a fireworks display in the evening. The family still celebrates the ritual of getting together for a big meal on the 4th of July, but they adapted it to meet the needs of the new family member. Finally, stepfamilies will often form new rituals of their own. These can help to create a new and unique identity for the stepfamily so long as everyone in the family is a willing participant in the ritual.

Stepfamilies also have to manage dialectical tensions that exist in the communication between stepchildren and their nonresidential parent (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006). As children transition from living with both biological parents to living with a biological and a stepparent, one of the dialectics they experience is a *parenting/nonparenting contradiction*. On the one hand, stepchildren often want to maintain a close relationship with the nonresidential parent. However, on the other hand, they tend to be concerned about possible conflict between the nonresidential parent and the stepparent, the possibility of the nonresidential parent disrupting their everyday lives, experiencing loyalty conflicts between the nonresidential parent and the stepfamily, and being overwhelmed by an all-adult group of co-parents (e.g., three parents "ganging up" on them). Another contradiction experienced by stepchildren is *openness/closedness* (Braithwaite & Baxter). As noted previously, stepchildren often want an open and close relationship with their nonresidential parent. Nevertheless, they also sometimes experience this openness as problematic when it came to matters such as discussing their residential parent or hurting the feelings of the nonresidential parent by saying positive things about their relationship with the stepparent. Braithwaite and Baxter found that most stepchildren handled this dialectic by segmentation: discussing some topics with the nonresidential parent while treating others as off limits.

It is often the case that children want to be centered (e.g., informed on issues they feel they need to know about, but left out of those that would put them in an uncomfortable situation) but not caught in the middle in stepfamilies (Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, & Jones, 2008). Accordingly, children in stepfamilies confront two dialectic contradictions. First, they have to manage an *openness-closedness* dialectic by avoiding exposure to information that is beyond what they can handle or being used as go-betweens by their parents, while at the same time being kept in the loop and not shut out by their parents withholding information. Navigating this dialectic requires exquisite thoughtfulness and judgment by parents and children. In addition, the struggle over openness versus closeness (or revealing versus concealing) appears to play a vital role in children's feelings of being caught in the middle in stepfamilies (Afifi, 2003). The second dialectic associated with being centered but not caught in the middle is *control-restraint*. Being in the middle in such a family context can afford stepchildren some degree of control and influence by, for example, getting away with things due to their two parents not being on the same page, or perhaps wielding influence over their parent's new dating relationships. At the same time they are sometimes put in situations where they feel the need to choose between their two parents. The findings from Braithwaite et al.'s (2008) investigation are particularly noteworthy for they illustrate the concerns, and perhaps even

strategies, of stepchildren as they carefully manage dialectic oppositions in the service of finding a comfortable alternative to being caught in the middle.

Roles in Stepfamilies

Family roles simultaneously shape and are shaped by communication patterns within the family. Although the roles of child and parent are fairly clear in most family contexts, there is considerable ambiguity inherent in being a stepparent. Many stepparents are unsure about assuming the role of parent. After all, in many stepfamilies the children still have two biological parents. What is the ideal role of a stepparent in this family context? Family scientists Mark Fine, Marilyn Coleman, and Lawrence Ganong (1998) investigated this issue by asking parents, stepparents, and children in stepfamilies about what they think the ideal role of a stepparent is. They also asked respondents to describe the actual role of the stepparent in their family. For the ideal role of a stepparent, just over half of the parents and stepparents said “parent.” In other words, the stepparent should assume the role of parent just as a biological parent would. In contrast, only 29% of the children offered this response. Evidently, a greater proportion of parents and stepparents, compared to children, think that “parent” is the ideal role for a stepparent. Among these same respondents, 18% of the parents and 18% of the stepparents indicated that “friend” was the ideal role of a stepparent. In contrast, 40% of the children thought that “friend” was the ideal role for a stepparent. So it seems that more children want their stepparent to assume the role of friend, whereas parents and stepparents want the stepparent to assume the role of parent. It is also interesting that 48% of the stepparents said that their actual role in the family was that of parent, whereas only 28% of the children said that their stepparent held the role of parent. Fine et al.’s (1998) study illustrates how there are not only different desires within the family for stepparent roles, but also how family members do not necessarily agree on what the actual role of the family’s stepparent is. For the most part, parents and children have a clearer perception of what the stepparent role is in contrast to stepparents who indicate that their role in the family is not entirely clear (Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1999).

The performance of some parental roles in stepfamilies may be specific to the sex of the parent. For example, mothers will often assume a variety of roles to control the development of the relationship between their children and new spouse (Coleman, Ganong, & Weaver, 2001). Mothers will sometimes perform the role of *defender* in which they try to shield their children from unfair discipline, perceived slights, and misunderstanding on the part of the stepfather. In the role of *gatekeeper*, mothers literally control the stepfather’s access to their children both during courtship and marriage. For instance, it may take many years before a mother will leave her children alone with their stepfather. Mothers also act as *mediators* between children and their stepfathers. Coleman et al. (2001) note that the mediator role is particularly common early in the formation of stepfamilies when disagreements are prevalent. A related role performed by mothers in stepfamilies is that of *interpreter*. Interpreters not only step in and referee conflicts, but they also explain each family member’s perspective to the other. When lines of communication between children and the stepfather may be hindered or nonexistent, the mother’s performance of the interpreter role can be vital to salvaging some degree of civility in the family environment.

Remarriage and the formation of a stepfamily often change the interactions between a mother and her children. When mothers remarry they decrease their use of harsh discipline tactics such as yelling, spanking, and hitting (Thomson, Mosley, Hanson, & McLanahan, 2001). However, remarried mothers supervise their children less than stable single mothers (Thomson et al., 2001). So remarriage brings some obvious improvements in mother–child interactions, but also some declines in the form of less supervision.

Stepmothers have a particularly challenging role to fulfill in many remarried families. As mentioned elsewhere in this chapter, there is an abundance of negatively toned folklore

concerning stepmothers. Stepmothers often feel that they have to go the extra mile to prove that they are not like the wicked stepmother in *Cinderella* (Guisinger, Cowan, & Schulberg, 1989). In so doing, they often start by forming good relationships with their stepchildren but their optimistic attitudes toward stepparenting erode noticeably within 3–5 years of marriage. Guisinger et al. (1989) also found that a quality marriage goes hand in hand with good relationships between stepmothers and their stepchildren. Many stepmothers must also contend with some of the negative emotions that stem from occupying a role that sometimes excludes them or makes them feel less than 100% legitimate. The feminist scholar Elizabeth Church (1999) interviewed 104 stepmothers and found that about half had felt jealous and/or envious in their role as stepmother. Feelings of jealousy were provoked by three types of circumstances: feeling second best, feeling like an outsider, and feeling like a rival. When stepmothers felt jealous due to a perceived rivalry, it was not the children's biological mother who was the rival. Rather, many felt that they had to compete with their stepchildren for their partner's attention. Church (1999) argues that often stepmothers' jealousy is an expression of feeling disconnected from the family and feeling powerless. In many families stepmothers occupy a precarious role. They are expected to form good relationships with the children and get involved in their care—but not too involved. When either biological parent pursues interaction with the children, stepmothers may be expected to step back, never having all of the full rights and privileges of a biological mother.

Stepfamily Typologies

Scientists develop typologies to classify and organize things as they naturally occur in the world. For example, creatures in the animal kingdom can be classified as mammals, birds, reptiles, fish, and so on. Knowing that an animal belongs to one of these categories can be useful for understanding its traits and qualities. However, no single typology can serve all purposes. Therefore, others might classify animals on the basis of, say, their diet (i.e., carnivore, herbivore, omnivore). These examples show how there are multiple ways of classifying the same elements depending upon the different motivations and purposes of the classifier. There is perhaps no area of family science in which more typologies have been generated than in the study of stepfamilies. At a minimum, this is a reflection of the interest and importance of stepfamilies, along with the remarkable diversity that can be found in this family form.

Stepfamily Development

One way that stepfamilies can be reliably classified is on the basis their pattern of development (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999). Baxter and her colleagues paid particular attention to turning points in the development of stepfamily relationships. When asked to focus on those key events in the family's early history that brought them to where they are today, respondents most frequently cited "changes in household/family composition" (mentioned by 94% of all respondents), "conflict or disagreement" (72%), "holidays and special events" (67%), "quality time" (64%), and "family crisis" (55%). It appears that these various turning points are characteristic in the development of most stepfamilies. As part of these interviews, Baxter and her associates asked participants to draw a graph where the horizontal axis is time (0–48 months) and the vertical axis is what % they "feel like a family" (0–100). Analyses of these revealed five distinct stepfamily development trajectories that are summarized in Table 13.1.

There are several notable qualities to Baxter et al.'s (1999) findings on stepfamily development trajectories that are evident from Table 13.1. First, it is quite obvious that not all stepfamilies develop in the same way. Some experience a smooth and rapid progression toward feeling like a family whereas others have a more turbulent development trajectory, or never really develop the sense of being a family. Second, even though the majority of stepfamilies successfully develop a sense of cohesion and unity, it is apparent that some (i.e., "stagnating"

Table 13.1 Baxter et al.'s (1999) taxonomy of stepfamily development trajectories

| <i>Trajectory Type</i> | <i>Prevalence</i> | <i>Description</i> |
|--------------------------|-------------------|---|
| Accelerated | 31% | Started out at feeling somewhat like a family and rapidly progressed with an almost 4:1 ratio of positive to negative turning points |
| Prolonged | 27% | Started out not feeling like a family but slowly progressed toward family cohesion with a 3:1 ratio of positive to negative turning points |
| Stagnating | 14% | Started out not feeling like a family and never developed the feeling over the first four years; they experienced a 2:1 ratio of positive to negative turning points but these did not create the feeling of a family |
| Declining | 6% | Started out feeling like a family but that feeling steadily declined over the first four years; they experienced a 2:1 ratio of negative to positive turning points |
| High-amplitude turbulent | 22% | Drastic fluctuation in feeling like a family during the first four years; numerous positive and negative turning points that each altered their feeling of being a family |

Note. From Baxter, L.A., Braithwaite, D.O., & Nicholson, J.H. (1999). Turning points in the development of blended families. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 16, 291–313. © 1999 by SAGE. Reprinted by permission of SAGE.

and “declining”) never successfully achieve that goal. From these data, that appears to be the case for about 1 in 5 stepfamilies.

To gain a deeper understanding of what differentiated the stepfamilies, Braithwaite and her associates conducted further analyses of the interviews from these stepfamily members to examine how family processes variables discriminated among the different types (Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001). They found that *accelerated* stepfamilies rapidly developed traditional family roles, norms, boundaries, and expectations. They seemed to approach stepfamily life expecting traditional nuclear family roles and norms to develop. Their strong solidarity helped them to smoothly work through the conflicts that they experienced early in their development. *Prolonged* families tended to be adaptable, flexible, and generally satisfied with their stepfamily experiences. Even though they started out uncertain, they were willing to negotiate things like family roles and were open to communication about these issues. Unlike the accelerated families, those with a prolonged trajectory did not compare themselves to a nuclear family. Families with the *declining* trajectory seemed to have a lot of trouble from the word go. They started out with great expectations but almost immediately experienced loyalty conflicts, ambiguous and strained family roles, and divisive family boundaries. Their struggles were characterized by eventually developing impermeable and divisive boundaries by bloodline and generation, and ultimately, avoidance of communication. By the end of their fourth year, these families were around zero on the “feeling like a family” scale. *Stagnating* families experienced awkwardness in their role and felt, as Braithwaite and her associates put it, “thrown together.” They wanted a normal or traditional family life but, ironically, the more they tried to create that the more resistance they experienced from within. Obviously, not all members of these families were on the same page when it came to developing a “normal” family life. Loyalty conflicts, resentment, and dissatisfaction were common themes in these families that simply never took off. Finally, the *high-amplitude turbulent* families had a diverse and unstable development in their first four years. Like many other newly formed stepfamilies they started off with great expectations and quickly collided with realities that were at odds with these expectations. Feelings of betrayal and a lack of trust were common in these family types. Braithwaite et al. (2001) noted that a lack of solidarity between the couple was common in these families and prevented them from communicating a unified front to the children. Conflicts typically culminated in a “fork in the road” that was successfully

negotiated in some turbulent families. Those who avoided these conflicts were among the least satisfied of the turbulent families. After carefully examining the development trajectories and experiences, Braithwaite et al. (2001) concluded that the three key family processes that varied across the different families were boundary management, solidarity, and adaptation.

Children's Perceptions of Stepfamily Relationships

It is customary to describe different types of stepfamilies by their formal structure (e.g., mother with her biological children and stepfather, both spouses with their own biological children, etc.). However, Gross (1987) described different stepfamilies from the perspective of their children. To do so, she interviewed 60 children and asked them to describe and explain who was in their family. The children's responses provide insight into the many different ways that some people might define family relationships, and how communication patterns in stepfamilies can sometimes be almost nonexistent, despite the fact that two people may share the same residence. These family structures, defined by children's subjective impressions, appear in Table 13.2. Gross (1987) found that the four different stepfamily structures were about equally common in her sample. In some cases (*retention* and *reduction*) the stepchildren refused to characterize their stepparents as "family." In other cases (*substitution* and *reduction*) the children essentially dropped one of the biological parents from their mental representation of "family." There are also many cases (*substitution* and *augmentation*) where the stepchildren willingly characterized their stepparents as family members. This unique taxonomy developed

Table 13.2 Gross's (1987) typology of children's perceptions of family membership

| <i>Stepfamily Structure</i> | <i>Prevalence</i> | <i>Description</i> |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|---|
| Retention | 33% | Include both biological parents as family. Do not include stepparent as a family member. Family identified as prior to divorce Nonresidential parent still very involved in child's life. Stepparents play a more negative role in child's life |
| Substitution | 13% | Exclude at least one biological parent from family, usually the nonresidential parent Include at least one stepparent in family Views family as child, one biological parent, and stepparent Household and family are synonymous Children are younger at separation from biological parent and remarriage to stepparent Qualified acceptance of stepparent |
| Reduction | 25% | Fewer than the original two parents viewed as family Stepparent not viewed as family member At least one biological parent (usually nonresidential) not viewed as family member Experience family as "one-parent family." Negative feelings toward stepparent |
| Augmentation | 28% | Both biological parents identified as family, as well as at least one stepparent Stepparent is not a "replacement" but an "addition" Usually involved custodial father and stepmother Many had previously lived with their mother Maintained contact with nonresidential parent Free movement between households, and lack of hostility between biological parents |

Note. From Gross, P. (1987). Defining post-divorce remarriage families: A typology based on the subjective perceptions of children. *Journal of Divorce*, 10, 205–217. (Taylor & Francis Ltd, <http://www.informaworld.com>), reprinted by permission of the publisher.

by Gross is a reminder that children approach stepfamily relationships with vastly differing perspectives. The theory of symbolic interaction (see chapter 2) would explain these different realities of family life through the children's communication patterns with their parents and stepparents. Where there is little communication at all, as in the case of a noncustodial "deadbeat dad," some children literally revise their mental representation of "family" to exclude that member. On the other hand, where stepparent-stepchild communication patterns reflect issues such as concern, guidance, reasonable discipline, recreation, and so forth, symbolic interactionists would argue that children would more readily incorporate the stepparent into the family's membership.

Gross (1987) defined stepfamily types based on children's views of who is in and who is out of the "family." Another useful way to think about stepfamily types is to define them based upon how children experience their relationships and social interactions (Schrodt, 2006b). Schrodt fruitfully employed this perspective to the study of 586 stepchildren who provided information on their stepfamilies. The analysis of these stepchildren's data showed that there were five distinct types of stepfamilies (see Table 13.3). These different stepfamilies were classifiable based on the following qualities of the stepfamily's interaction style: dissention,

Table 13.3 Schrodt's (2006b) Relational typology of stepfamilies

| <i>Stepfamily Relational Type</i> | <i>Prevalence</i> | <i>Description</i> |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------|--|
| Bonded | 18% | Closest Highly cohesive Low levels of dissention High levels of involvement, flexibility, and expressiveness High parental authority granted to stepparent High positive regard for stepparent |
| Functional | 31% | High levels of closeness High involvement, but just less than Bonded type Highly expressive, but just less than Bonded type Low avoidance, but slightly more than Bonded type Low levels of dissention Moderately high levels of positive regard for stepparent Below average parental authority granted to stepparent |
| Ambivalent | 24% | Above average levels of dissention Above average levels of avoidance Slightly below average levels of stepfamily involvement, flexibility, and expressiveness Slightly below average stepparent positive regard and parental authority Stepchildren are ambivalent toward stepfamily |
| Evasive | 16% | High levels of dissention High levels of avoidance Low levels of expressiveness Low regard for primary stepparent High levels of strife and conflict Emotional ambiguity about stepparent-stepchild relationship |
| Conflictual | 11% | Extremely high levels of stepfamily dissention and avoidance High levels of conflict Absence of family unity Low levels of stepfamily involvement and flexibility Slightly below average expressiveness Lowest level of positive regard for primary stepparent |

Note. Adapted from Schrodt, P. (2006b). A typological examination of communication competence and mental health in stepchildren. *Communication Monographs*, 73, 309–333. Reprinted by permission of the publisher (Taylor & Francis Ltd, <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals>).

involvement, avoidance, flexibility, and expressiveness. In addition, the following aspects of stepchildren's perception of their stepparents also helped to define these different stepfamily types: positive regard, parental authority, and affective certainty, which implies having a mutual understanding with the stepparent about how they feel about each other. One interesting quality of Schrod's findings is that the super cohesive and happy stepfamily that is reminiscent of Coleman et al.'s (2004) *Brady Bunch* type, which would correspond to Schrod's *Bonded* type, is fairly rare, comprising fewer than 1 in 5 stepfamilies. One also finds that about half of all stepfamilies can be characterized as either ambivalent, harboring both positive and negative feelings about the stepfamily, or decidedly negative in nature, as reflected in the *Evasive* and *Conflictual* stepfamilies. This is a stark reminder of the stress inherent in the task of reconstructing a family in the aftermath of divorce when children are involved.

Relationships Between Former Spouses

A lot of the research on stepfamily relationships has understandably focused on relationships between children and their stepparents and the marital relationship in stepfamilies. What is sometimes overlooked when people think about stepfamily relationships is the relationship between the two biological parents, only one of whom is currently the custodial parent. Remarriage after a divorce does not represent the end of the relationship between two biological parents. A divorced couple with children often needs to continue some form of relationship to coordinate child care and visitation even though one or both may have remarried and formed a new family. In such cases, children become part of a *binuclear family*. The communication patterns of formerly married spouses can take on a variety of forms. Ahrons and Rodgers (1987) described these in their taxonomy of post-divorce relationships described in Table 13.4. What is most striking from the descriptions of these relationships is the diverse range of interaction patterns maintained by former spouses. Some (e.g., *dissolving duos*) permanently sever their lines of communication. This is probably a much more common

Table 13.4 Ahrons and Rodgers' (1987) typology of post-divorce relationships

| <i>Relationship Type</i> | <i>Description</i> |
|--------------------------|---|
| Dissolving Duos | No contact after divorce |
| Perfect Pals | Maintain mutual respect for each other after divorce Remain good friends Maintain open communication and family rituals They often remain single |
| Cooperative Colleagues | No real friendship Cooperate and coordinate efforts at parenting Compromise for the children's benefit Effectively manage conflicts |
| Angry Associates | Harbor resentment and anger toward each other Both active as parents but in parallel, not collectively Children experience loyalty conflicts |
| Fiery Foes | Intense anger No acceptance of other parent's rights Attempts to separate ex-spouse from children No cooperation between parents Children become pawns Parents still attached to each other as evidenced by their intense emotional reaction to each other |

Note. Adapted from Ahrons, C.R. and Rodgers, R.H. (1987). *Divorced Families: A Multidisciplinary View*. Copyright © 1987 by Constance R. Ahrons and Roy H. Rodgers. Used by permission of W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

communication pattern in divorced couples without any children. At the other end of the spectrum, the *perfect pals* manage to maintain open communication and continue to participate together in family activities and rituals. It is instructive to compare the types of post-divorce relations in this scheme to the children's subjective impressions of family membership described by Gross (1986). Recall that in some cases (*substitution* and *reduction*) Gross found that children would no longer consider one of their biological parents to be a member of the family. It would not be much of a stretch to suppose that the biological parents in such families are *dissolving duos* or perhaps *fiery foes*. Gross also found that children would often still consider a noncustodial parent to be a member of the family, in the cases of *retention* and *augmentation*. One might suppose that the divorced biological parents in these cases would be *perfect pals* or *cooperative colleagues*. One could develop additional hypotheses linking these different stepfamily relationships, but the underlying assumption is that the nature of the post-divorce relationship of the biological parents influences to some extent the child's consideration of these parents as members of the family.

Stepfamily Interaction Patterns

Finally, we present a typology of stepfamilies that is built around their characteristic interaction patterns, especially emanating from the parents. Family scientists Coleman, Ganong, and Fine (2004) noted that almost every typology of stepfamilies identifies *Brady Bunch Stepfamilies*. The label that scientists use for these families is a testament to the power of the media in influencing our thinking about families. Needless to say, these are stepfamilies that try to set up a situation that is indistinguishable from a first marriage family. Members of these families relate to each other as if they were parents and children, not stepparents and stepchildren. Their communication is open and abundant, as is their expression of affection. Coleman et al. (2004) observe that such families may be ill-prepared, unrealistic, and in denial. Like the Brady Bunch, these families may be striving not to function like a true first marriage family but rather a stereotype of a first marriage family. As Coleman et al. note, often situational demands for communication and problem solving do not fit the Brady Bunch ideal, and this can be cause for dissatisfaction. For some stepfamilies, however, this mentality may work, particularly when children are very young when the stepfamily is formed.

In contrast to the Brady Bunch Stepfamilies, the *detached stepparent/engaged parent* stepfamilies function with nonequivalent parental roles. Generally the mothers in these families are involved in the upbringing of the children and the stepfathers are detached. Stepfathers in these families show little affection toward the stepchildren, they might not get involved in their supervision, and engage in limited communication with them. In contrast mothers in these families are prone to engaging in frequent and intense communication with the children. Before condemning these stepfathers, it is important to realize that their detachment sometimes follows the directives of either the mother or her children (Coleman et al., 2004). Stepfathers are sometimes thrown into relationships with stepchildren merely as a function of their marriage to the mother. The stepparent-stepchild relationship is sometimes an incidental one that families manage by keeping a distance between the two, and leaving most of the parenting up to the mother.

A related type of stepfamily can be found in the *couple-focused stepfamilies*. Here the marital union is of paramount importance. In these stepfamilies the communication is largely between the spouses, and the stepparent is detached from the stepchildren. This pattern is perhaps most likely in cases where the children are older and breaking out on their own or when the children do not reside with the married couple. One might expect to see couple-focused stepfamilies for example in marriages that follow the death of a spouse later in life.

Finally, some stepfamilies could be characterized as *progressive stepfamilies*. Communication in these stepfamilies is modified to fit the needs to the family's particular situation and demands. Well-established stepfamilies often develop their own unique and creative style of

communication to meet the complexities of their family life. One example cited by Coleman et al. (2004) is when mothers interpret the stepfathers to stepchildren and vice versa. As a way of compensating for the lack of shared history in the stepfamily, the mothers may aid their children's and spouse's understandings of each other by enacting this creative communication behavior. Progressive stepfamilies often exhibit excellent family communication and problem solving. Their relationships are sometimes closer than those of first marriage families. At this time, family scientists and clinicians do not fully understand how such families are developed. However, it appears that a very flexible approach to family communication coupled with a respect for different family forms, devoid of any preconceived notions, are integral elements of progressive stepfamilies.

Challenges in Stepfamilies

Stepfamilies face a number of challenges in sorting out their relationships that contribute to family stress. Some of the issues that they face, such as conflict, are comparable in kind to those of nuclear families, but perhaps differ in intensity. Other challenges such as negotiating conflicting loyalties to a stepparent and noncustodial parent are unique to stepfamilies. In this section we examine challenges faced by stepfamilies that include relational communication issues, conflict, adaptability and cohesion, and child adjustment.

Communication Challenges

Although all developing families face a number of communication challenges as they build relationships, trust, roles, and boundaries, stepfamilies have unique dynamics that make these challenges particularly salient. When a married couple with children gets divorced and then at least one remarries, forming a stepfamily, frequent communication with the ex-spouse is often still necessary. Whether they like it or not, most former spouses in this situation have to divide their attention between their current stepfamily and the task of co-parenting with their former spouse, who is commonly in the role of noncustodial or nonresidential parent. Naturally, issues related to their children compromise the vast majority of their communication, and former spouses in this situation typically interact as often as three times a week (Braithwaite, McBride, & Schrodt, 2003). For children in stepfamilies, sustaining consistent contact with the noncustodial parent can be a challenge especially once that parent remarries, and especially when that remarriage happens shortly after separation from the other biological parent before regular contact patterns are established (Juby, Billette, Laplante, & Le Bourdais, 2007).

Within stepfamilies there are a number of unique challenges that differ from nuclear families with both biological parents. To identify these issues Golish (2003) interviewed 90 people (stepparents, biological parents, and children/stepchildren) from 30 different stepfamilies. They were asked how their communication, feelings, and expectations changed over time, and to identify their problem areas and strengths. One of the most common challenges cited by participants was *feeling caught*. This typically involved triangulation in the relationship between a child, his or her custodial parents, and his or her noncustodial parent. The feeling of being caught in the middle is likely when family communication boundaries become enmeshed, due to the revelation of too much personal information through things such as inappropriate disclosures (Affi, 2003). This challenge caused children to avoid talking to one parent in front of the other or bringing up certain topics of discussion with one of the parents. Interestingly, it was sometimes the parents who felt caught. For example, sometimes the biological parent was used as a go-between by their child and spouse. Instead of the stepchild and stepparent communicating directly, they would air their grievances through the parent. Some families had problems with *ambiguity of parental roles*. Almost all of the stepfamilies studied by Golish (2003) experienced confusion and uncertainty about the stepparent's role in disciplining children. This sometimes causes a clash between the "friend" and "disciplinary" role

performed by the stepparent. It is interesting that role reversals where the child acts as a peer or “pseudo” parent to the custodial parents, are somewhat common in stepfamilies (Afifi, 2003). This parentification (see chapter 12) is yet another illustration of ambiguity in parental roles that can be difficult for some stepfamilies to sort out. Stepfamilies also had to contend with *regulating boundaries with the noncustodial family*. Many children in stepfamilies are still grieving the loss of their family system. This often took the form of having to renegotiate a different kind of relationship with a now noncustodial father. However, sometimes this challenge in regulating relationships was experienced between former spouses. Where there are issues of joint or shared custody, former spouses cannot simply stop communicating, but rather have to work out arrangements for care of the children.

One particularly unique challenge faced by stepfamilies is *traumatic bonding*. It was often the case that mothers and daughters formed a very close bond as the mother made the transition from divorce to single parenthood. The bond formed during these hard times would often persevere during formation of the stepfamily. At this time, the stepparent would be seen as an intruder in the family. At the same time, the stepparent may feel jealous or excluded by this intense mother–daughter bond. Stepfamilies were also challenged by *rying for resources*. Issues like money, space, and privacy are particularly salient in stepfamilies. The desire for one’s own territory could be fueled by the feeling of being invaded by outsiders, which could also increase the desire for privacy. Struggling to secure these resources in an environment where they are often scarce sets the stage for abundant conflicts within the stepfamily. A related challenge faced by stepfamilies is *discrepancies in conflict management styles*. The most common scenario for this challenge was a stepparent’s desire to openly confront an issue and the biological parent’s and children’s desire to avoid the issue. Successfully overcoming this challenge often involved all parties adjusting their communication style. The final communication challenge documented by Golish (2003) was *building solidarity as a family unit*. Particularly strong and successful families accomplished this by spending time together, developing their own family rituals, and displaying affection toward each other. In other cases stepfamilies would incorporate humor into their interactions or naturally and gradually introduce the child and stepparent without trying to force the relationship. Even though most families have to deal with at least some of these issues, they are particularly evident in stepfamilies and their successful negotiation is vital to developing strong stepfamily relationships. Golish (2003) observed that the “meta-theme” underlying many of these communication challenges is the negotiation of boundaries within the family and across families.

In a comparable study, Cissna, Cox, and Bochner (1990) interviewed nine stepfamilies that had at least two school-aged children at home and asked them about issues such as managing relationships with the former spouse, problems in reorganizing their family, and strategies for overcoming these problems. All nine of the families mentioned issues related to balancing the marital versus parental relationships. Cissna et al. (1990) found that there were two dominant tasks that families faced in order to manage this dialectic. First, the family needs to *establish the solidarity of the marriage relationship in the minds of the stepchildren*. Marriages are freely chosen by the spouses, but not by their children. As Golish (2003) observed, sometimes children might view the stepparents as an intruder into a close relationship that was established during tough times. For a stepfamily to develop and function effectively, stepchildren need to see the marital relationship as solid and unified. A second major task that stepfamilies face is *establishing parental authority, particularly the credibility of the stepparent*. Once the children appreciate the substantial nature of the parent–stepparent relationship, the next step is to view the stepparent as something of an authority figure. Without that, boundaries can get blurred and conflicts can arise. Cissna et al. (1990) observed that one of the difficult chores for the stepparent is building a friendship relationship with the child while at the same time exercising discipline and developing the role of authority figure. This is an unusually challenging dialectic that must be delicately balanced with acute sensitivity and social skills on the part of the stepparent.

Building a sense of family solidarity and identity is a theme that has clearly emerged as a challenge or task to be accomplished in many stepfamilies. One way that this is expressed through communication behavior is in terms of address. These are the labels that people use to describe family members (e.g., my “stepmother,” “my dad’s wife,” or “Jane”). Stepchildren will engage in code switching with these terms in order to signify solidarity, separateness, or even to balance the need to show respect to the stepparent with the need to lessen tension between the biological and stepfamilies (Kellas, LeClair-Underberg, & Normand, 2008). So, for example, stepchildren will sometimes use familial terms such as “dad” or “sister” to refer to people who are really their stepfathers or stepsisters as a mechanism for creating solidarity. However, stepchildren will also sometimes use formal address terms like “my dad’s wife,” instead of “stepmother,” and “Mike’s daughter,” instead of “stepsister” in order to communicate separateness (Kellas et al.). This complex code switching reveals some of the communicative intricacies that often go unnoticed by outsiders, but that reflect the struggle to manage and balance a “family” identity for a stepfamily without losing a sense of separateness and uniqueness.

Conflict

Because of their unique family structure stepfamilies tend to have their own set of stressors and concerns that contribute substantially to interpersonal conflicts (Burrell, 1995). It is often the case in stepfamilies that an “outsider” comes into a long-established physical environment and relational context. Children sometimes have a close relationship with their custodial parent forged during difficult times. They are often accustomed to their custodial parent’s undivided attention when they are home together. In addition children may have their own room and space in the house that does not have to be shared with others. The introduction of a stepparent, particularly one with children in tow, can dramatically upset these norms. Obviously the situation is ripe for conflict, and may explain why stepfamilies experience more conflict than intact families (Barber & Lyons, 1994). A lot of the conflicts in stepfamilies occur between the spouses and often concern the children/stepchildren (Ganong & Coleman, 2000). In stepfamilies, it is sometimes the case that the biological parent has far more history and experience raising children than the stepparent, who may have no childrearing experience at all. This immediately sets up a situation where the legitimacy of one person’s perspective on child rearing is questioned and almost impossible to substantiate. It is no wonder that conflicts over child rearing issues are so prevalent among spouses in stepfamilies.

Observations of family clinicians indicate that stepfamily households often have to address multiple sources of potential conflict that include outsiders and insiders, boundary disputes, power issues, conflicting loyalties, triangular relationships, and unity versus fragmentation of the new couple relationship (Visher, Visher, & Pasley, 2003). Researchers have reached similar conclusions, noting that the primary sources of conflict in stepfamilies often revolve around boundary issues (Burrell, 1995; Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk, 2001). Subsidiary issues included disagreements over resources, loyalty conflicts, individuals having a “guard and protect” mentality, and conflict with extended family (Coleman et al., 2001). Coleman and her associates documented these family conflicts through interviews of adults and children from 17 stepfamilies. Some of the major resources that they frequently argued about were possessions, space, time and attention, and finances. Loyalty conflicts were often felt by children who seemed to be torn between loyalty to their stepparent and their noncustodial parent. What Coleman et al. (2001) characterized as a “guard and protect” ideology involved the mother trying to protect an almost peer-like mother–daughter relationship, attempts to protect the children from an overly strict stepfather, or attempts to protect the children from a nonresidential parent. Instances of these interaction patterns highlighted sharp disagreements and conflicts often ensued. Finally, stepfamilies often experienced conflicts with extended family members who did not view the stepfamily as a legitimate family unit. This type of conflict is a

good illustration of a dispute that involves an external boundary issue, whereas most other conflicts in the stepfamilies concerned boundaries within the family.

It is sometimes the case in stepfamilies that role ambiguity and boundary issues collectively contribute to conflicts (Burrell, 1995). For example, role ambiguity occurs when people are uncertain about what actions they are expected to take and exactly what their function is in the family. Of course, boundaries represent the often invisible psychological limits of enacted and accepted behaviors within the family and between its members and outsiders. For a new stepparent, role ambiguity and boundary issues may go hand in hand. The role of disciplinarian is often a very uncertain one for the new stepparent. Stepchildren who are unaccustomed to this new role of the stepparent may reject such forms of communication. At the same time, some stepparents may have a hard time communicating in an authoritative fashion toward their stepchildren. This role ambiguity is entwined in boundary issues. How permeable is the stepparent–stepchild relationship? Does the stepparent have the “right” or authority to command the stepchild to do something or to not do something? Does the stepparent have the right or authority to use corporal punishment (involving nonverbal communication)? Should there be as much physical affection in the stepparent–stepchild relationship as might be expected between biological parents and their children? These are all issues that concern both roles and boundaries. They can be very potent catalysts for conflict in most stepfamilies. These conflicts may occur between stepparent and stepchild, between two spouses who disagree on how the stepparent should interact with the stepchild, or between a child and his or her biological parent who disagree on what is acceptable behavior on the part of the stepparent.

There is an interesting power dynamic in stepfamilies that helps to explain the nature of some common conflicts that occur in these contexts. In stepfather families (perhaps the most common form of remarried families with children), family members agree that the mother has most authority and power for major decision making (Giles-Sims & Crosbie-Burnett, 1989). However, for everyday decisions, adolescents appear to have as much influence as the adults, especially early on in the history of the stepfamily. Further, Giles-Sims and Crosbie-Burnett (1989) found that when it comes to making major decisions, adolescents perceived themselves as having more power than their stepfathers—a view that was not necessarily shared by their stepfathers. This potential power struggle between adolescent and stepparent is undoubtedly manifest in conflict interactions until the family is able to establish some norms, or in systems theory terminology, homeostasis. The struggle for power and the quest to establish new family norms may explain why long-term remarried couples with stepchildren experience more conflict than long-term remarried couples with their own biological children (MacDonald & DeMaris, 1995). When children are born into an intact marriage, power, roles, norms and decision making patterns can be gradually and consistently developed throughout childhood. On the other hand, when a remarried couple has stepchildren, where there is no relational history with one of the parents, these same roles, norms, and decision making patterns must be negotiated and established from scratch. In long term marriages, where the stepchildren are likely to be older children and adolescents, the potential for interpersonal conflict is extensive.

What are the communication strategies that stepfamilies use to resolve their conflicts? Coleman et al. (2001) found that stepfamilies would often compromise on rules and discipline, present a unified parental front on rules and discipline, talk directly with the person one is in conflict with, or reframe the problem as less serious, perhaps with a joke. Most communication scholars would agree that these are generally effective ways of handling conflict. This suggests through their often extensive experience with conflict, stepfamilies often develop and deploy effective means for managing these conflicts.

Having said that “talking directly” is one way stepfamilies resolve conflict, there are some special exceptions. Sometimes stepchildren handle conflict-laden or other sensitive topics by avoiding the topic in family interactions. Golish and Caughlin (2002) studied this issue by

interviewing adolescents and young adults in stepfamilies, using Petronio's (2000) Communication Privacy Management perspective (see chapter 3) to develop hypotheses about why and when adolescents would avoid various topics with their parents and stepparents. They found that children reported the greatest topic avoidance with stepparents, followed by fathers, and finally mothers. The most commonly avoided topic across all types of parental relationships was sex. Other commonly avoided topics included talking about the other parent or family and money (e.g., child support payments). When asked why they avoided these topics, the adolescents' and young adults' most typical replies concerned self protection, protecting the harmony of the relationship with the parent or stepparent, and conflict. Responses that reflected concerns with conflict included the desire to keep conflicts from happening as well as the desire to keep some conflicts from escalating. Even though people often feel that discussing concerns openly is the best way to develop and manage relationships, in an often fragile context of stepfamily relationships sometimes the avoidance of certain topics is the more sensible and comfortable strategy—at least from the perspective of a child in the stepfamily.

Before leaving the topic of conflict, it bears mentioning that conflict can be a catalyst for positive change in stepfamilies (Coleman et al., 2001). As hard as it is for many stepfamilies to sort out their various issues, establish boundaries, and define new roles, the efforts invested in these conflicts may yield dividends so long as they do not consume the stepfamily. Stepfamilies can achieve harmony and happiness but that may only come after intense negotiation, or conflict, over issues such as space, roles, expectations, discipline, and privacy.

Adaptability and Cohesion

It is generally the case that stepfamilies have lower family cohesion and adaptability than first married families (Pink & Wampler, 1985; Waldren, Bell, Peek, & Sorell, 1990). People in stepfamilies report lower cooperation and greater fragmentation in family relationships than people in nuclear families (Banker & Gaertner, 1998). Bray and Berger (1993) found not only that newly-formed stepfamilies had lower levels of cohesion than nuclear families, but that levels of family cohesion dropped even lower in longer-established (i.e., 2.5 and 5–7 years) stepfamilies. Grandchildren report a greater sense of shared family identity with their family of origin grandparents than their stepgrandparents, although supportive communication from grandparents is positively associated with a shared family identity for both types of grandparents (Soliz, 2007). The fact that stepfamilies have lower cohesion than first married families is understandable. After all, the stepparent and any of his or her children often have very little relational history with other family members. Recall that the typical interval between divorce and remarriage is only 3 years. It is therefore plausible to assume that many stepchildren might have only known their stepparent for a year or two prior to sharing a residence with him or her. Therefore, the type of family cohesion that is associated with first marriage families of longer duration may take years to develop, and in the majority of cases it may never fully develop. What is perhaps more perplexing is the lower adaptability in stepfamilies. Stepfamilies experience higher levels of stress than first married families (Waldren et al., 1990). Although extreme adaptability can actually generate stress, some degree of adaptability is necessary to effectively cope with stressors. It is exactly this adaptability that seems to be in short supply in many stepfamilies. It is also worth noting that stepfamilies actually want similar levels of cohesion and adaptability as first marriage families do (Pink & Wampler, 1985), so it is not by design that they have lower adaptability and cohesion.

The lower adaptability and cohesion of stepfamilies is clearly evident in their communication patterns. For example, newly-formed stepfamilies rate their family communication more poorly than newly-formed first marriage families (Bray & Berger, 1993). Also, stepfathers report less positive and more negative communication with family members than fathers in nuclear families (Pink & Wampler, 1985). Grinwald (1995) asked adolescents aged 12–18 to report on various positive (e.g., “my mother/ father is always a good listener”) and negative

(e.g., “my mother/father insults me when he/she is angry with me”) aspects of communication with their parent and stepparent. The reports of adolescents from first marriage families were compared with those of stepfamilies that were formed after divorce and stepfamilies that were formed after death of a parent. The poorest parent–child communication was reported in the stepfamilies formed after divorce, followed by those formed after death, and the best parent–child communication was reported by adolescents in first marriage families. Grinwald’s study points to the fact that at least some of the cohesion and communication problems experienced by stepfamilies may be a continuation of the turmoil experienced in a prior family that ended in divorce. Remarried parents also provide less social support to their children—a level that is equivalent to divorced parents but less than parents in first marriages (White, 1992). White’s (1992) investigation suggested that the social support deficits from remarried parents can be explained by lower levels of contact with the children and lower quality relationships and solidarity with them.

Elsewhere in this chapter we reviewed research findings showing that levels of conflict are often higher in stepfamilies than first marriage families. This communication pattern is undoubtedly linked with issues of problematic adaptability and cohesion. One particularly interesting consequence of this higher family conflict and lower cohesion is that children in stepfamilies leave home sooner than children in nuclear families (White, 1994b). In a very carefully controlled study, 65% of stepchildren were found to leave home before the age of 19, compared to 50% of the children in first marriage families (Aquilino, 1991). Two compelling explanations for this effect concern weaker relationships or cohesion in stepfamilies, including failure to fully integrate adolescent children into the family system, and children being driven out by or seeking to escape family conflict (Crosbie-Burnett & McClintic, 2000b; White, 1994b). Obviously, as children depart from stepfamilies, parent–child communication presumably drops as well.

Even though cohesion can be difficult to generate in stepfamilies, it is not out of the realm of possibility. Schrodt (2006a) found that there are several qualities of a stepchild–stepparent relationship that are positively associated with a sense of closeness. These include, first, positive regard for the stepparent and showing respect for the stepparent. On a related second point, when the stepchild grants the stepparent the power and authority to judge what behaviors are appropriate and inappropriate for the stepchild, there is greater closeness in their relationship. Finally, when stepchildren perceive that they have a settled relationship with the stepparent, where they know how the stepparent feels about them and where they have communicated their feelings to the stepparent, there is a greater sense of closeness. Despite the inherent difficulty in achieving a high level of cohesion in stepparent–stepchild relationships, research shows that with a healthy dose of respect and mutual understanding about the nature of their relationship, stepparents and their stepchildren can experience a sense of closeness.

Divergent Realities

Another challenge that is common to many stepfamilies is the differing perceptions of the residential parent’s re-partnering through marriage, cohabitation, or dating (Koerner, Rankin, Kenyon, & Korn, 2004). In the majority of mother–adolescent child dyads studied by Keorner et al., there were remarkable discrepancies in perceptions of the quality of the adolescent–new partner relationship, the impact of the new partner on the family’s life, and the impact of the new partner on the mother–adolescent relationship. It was most often the case that mothers saw things concerning the new partner more positively than the adolescent child did. For example, in a number of the families interviewed by Koerner and her associates, the mother perceived no change in her relationship with the adolescent child as a result of re-partnering, whereas the child perceived diminished time or attention. Starting a new relationship while still keeping children a top priority and center of attention can be quite difficult. Whether mothers

are exaggerating the positive qualities of their new partner on the existing family or adolescents are taking an unrealistically dim view is hard to say. However, it is clear that the initiation of a new relationship for the mother is sometimes fraught with parent–child disagreements about the nature and impact of that new relationship and Koerner et al. suggest that inadequate parent–child communication could be the source of these divergent perspectives.

Child Adjustment in Stepfamilies

Given what is known about the special challenges faced by stepfamilies, the nature of their relationships, and their opportunities for conflict, researchers have been understandably concerned with the social and psychological adjustment of children who live in stepfamilies. Although a thorough review of this research is beyond the scope of this chapter, there are several highlights that are worth noting. First, children who live in stepfamilies tend to have slightly more externalizing behavior problems and slightly less social competence than their counterparts in first marriage families (Bray, 1999). Why is this the case? Obviously many children in stepfamilies undergo difficult life transitions that might include witnessing their biological parents' marriage deteriorate, experiencing the departure of one parent, perhaps living in financial hardship, moving to a new residence, and having a new adult member of the family move in to their residence (Anderson, Greene, Hetherington, & Clingempeel, 1999). These changes can sometimes all occur in a relatively short period of time.

Aside from the obvious structural and residential stressors that children in stepfamilies might have experienced, there is compelling evidence to show that their adjustment problems are also linked to family communication and relationship issues. In remarried families, parental negativity is significantly and positively correlated with child behavior problems (Anderson et al., 1999). This same research team found that adolescents in remarried families displayed more negativity toward their parent and stepparent than adolescents in nondivorced families did. Research also shows that the amount of conflict in stepfamilies is associated with child adjustment problems (Bray, 1999; Dunn, 2002).

Parents in stepfamilies tend to be less involved in the lives of their children than parents in two-parent biological or adoptive families are (Zill, 1994). This effect is especially pronounced for stepfathers (Fine, Voydanoff, & Donnelly, 1993). This is unfortunate because communication with stepfathers appears to be more vital to child adjustment outcomes than communication with mothers in stepfather families (Collins, Newman, & McKenry, 1995). On the other hand, communication with the father was a stronger predictor of child adjustment than communication with the stepmother in stepmother families (Collins et al., 1995). The Fine et al. (1993) investigation additionally revealed that positive parental communication behaviors such as praise, hugs, reading to the child, and private talks with the child were positively associated with child adjustment in stepfamilies whereas negative parental communication behaviors such as spanking and yelling at the child were negatively associated with child adjustment.

Some of the difficulties that children in stepfamilies experience may be more attributable to the legacy of their original family life. A sophisticated longitudinal study that followed over 1000 school children from age 6 to age 12 indicates that remarriage per se had no appreciable impact on children's aggressive and oppositional behavior, once the effects of parental divorce were taken into account (Pagani, Boulerice, Tremblay, & Vitaro, 1997). This study shows that many of the behavior problems that are evident in children living in stepfamilies may be a legacy of their biological parents' divorce. Contrary to what some might believe, a fairly rapid transition from the first marriage family to the stepfamily is associated with fewer relationship problems in the new family (Montgomery, Anderson, Hetherington, & Clingempeel, 1992). Evidently, it is less disruptive to move from one two-parent household to another in rapid succession, than it is to get settled into a single-parent household, only to then have to transition back into a two-parent household.

For the most part, research on child adjustment problems in stepfamilies supports the view that children in these contexts have slightly more behavior problems than children in first marriage families. Notwithstanding the environmental stress explanations for these effects, several theoretical explanations for these behavior problems focus on family relationship and communication problems in stepfamilies (Coleman et al., 2000). Most prominent among these are the family conflict explanation, which says that conflicts among divorced parents and within the stepfamily incite behavioral problems in children, and the deterioration of parental competencies, which explains child behavior problems in stepfamilies as a function of poor quality parenting, including uninvolved parenting, minimal parental positivity, and more negatively toned communication behaviors from parents and stepparents.

Resilience in Stepfamilies

As the preceding discussion shows, stepfamilies face more challenges and hardships than first marriage families. However, not all parents and children in stepfamilies have problems adjusting to their new family structure. The study of resilience is aimed at understanding how and why some people can experience stressful events (e.g., the formation of a stepfamily) without showing any lasting signs of distress. Understandably, effective family communication patterns appear to play an important role in resilient stepfamilies. Stepfamilies with high levels of open and positive communication and low levels of family communication problems (e.g., saying things which are better left unsaid) tend to have parents and children with better adjustment (Gosselin & David, 2007). In the research study that Gosselin and David conducted, stepfamily adjustment was measured with a questionnaire that assessed dimensions such as problematic boundaries, psychological exclusion of the stepparent, dissatisfaction with family roles, and lack of support for the stepparent's role. In a sample of South African stepfamilies, parent and child adaptation to stepfamily life was positively associated with several elements of the family's communication, including affirming communication (messages that convey support and care) and maintaining family activities and routines such as eating meals together and parent-child togetherness (Greeff & Du Toit, 2009). The most resilient families in this study also had relatively low levels of inflammatory communication that would otherwise worsen stressful situations. Even though on balance stepfamilies face substantial challenges, it is evident that certain effective family communication practices can mitigate those challenges and contribute to the stepfamily's resilience.

CONCLUSION

When marriages end because of death or divorce most people seek another marriage. However, remarriages have a divorce rate even higher than first marriages. Many of the interpersonal behaviors that might have contributed to deterioration of the first marriage might work similarly in a remarriage. A natural consequent of abundant remarriage is a large number of stepfamilies. There are many negative images and views of stepfamilies in both the media and society more generally. Where there are positive images of stepfamilies in the media, as in *The Brady Bunch*, they are often unrealistic and may engender expectations for relational harmony that simply cannot be met. People in stepfamilies often start out with great expectations but the sometimes difficult realities of living in a stepfamily quickly become evident and create distance between stepparents and stepchildren. Family scholars have found that not all stepfamilies develop their relationships in the same way. Some develop rapidly, some slowly, and some never really develop a sense of "family." As stepfamilies develop, they often face disagreements about the role of stepparents in the family. Mothers in stepfather families often assume a variety of roles to regulate and referee the relationship between their children and spouse. Research consistently shows that there are a wide variety of different stepfamily types

and forms. However, most stepfamilies face communication challenges such as feeling caught, negotiating ambiguous parental roles, regulating boundaries, and vying for resources. Research findings also indicate that many stepfamilies have to contend with greater conflict, lower adaptability, lower cohesion, divergent perspectives, and more issues of boundary regulation than nuclear families. Perhaps because of this, children in stepfamilies exhibit more behavior problems than children in nuclear families and these are associated to some extent with the quality of the stepfamily relationships and communication. Finally, some stepfamilies are resilient and function quite well, and the hallmark of these families is effective communication among their members.

Part IV

**Family Interaction, Health,
and Well-Being**

14 Family Interaction and Mental Health

Mental health problems are pervasive in America, yet poorly understood. It is estimated that 48% of the U.S. population will have a diagnosable psychological disorder at some time in their lives (Regier et al., 1993). Because mental health problems are often invisible, their pervasiveness is not well appreciated and because they are associated with a stigma, they often go untreated. Nevertheless, mental health problems can ruin relationships, careers, families, and lives. Even relatively mild psychological problems such as loneliness or social anxiety can be profoundly distressing and painfully debilitating. More severe psychological problems such as schizophrenia can permanently shatter lives sometimes rendering people virtually noncommunicative. The idea that mental health is somehow related to family interaction is nothing new. Early theorizing about mental health problems, 50–100 years ago, often postulated a connection between marital and family interactions and psychological disorders (e.g., Freud, 1917/1966; Lasègue, 1873; Sullivan, 1953). What are some of the mental health problems that are associated with problematic family interactions? How might family interactions contribute to, aggravate, or trigger relapses in mental health problems? To answer these questions, we present current research and theorizing on problems such as depression, loneliness, schizophrenia, eating disorders, and alcoholism from a family interaction perspective. These are but a mere sample of some of the many mental health problems that are linked with troubled family interaction patterns. Interested readers can consult Beach (2001), Jacob (1987), and Segrin (2001b) for further information on these topics.

DEPRESSION

Definition

Major Depressive Disorder is a pervasive illness with a lifetime risk of 10% to 25% for women and 5% to 12% for men (DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Kessler et al., 1994). Depressive episodes are marked by severely depressed mood, diminished interest in any activities, significant weight loss or gain, sleep disturbance, psychomotor agitation or retardation, fatigue, feelings of worthlessness and guilt, difficulty concentrating, and recurrent thoughts of death or suicidal ideation (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). For a formal diagnosis, these symptoms must be evident for a period of at least two weeks, but for many people with depression these may last months or even years. Depression, like many other mental health problems, can be caused by a variety of factors. However, in virtually all cases depression has substantial interpersonal implications that can and will change the nature of family interactions. This point was stressed by Joiner, Coyne, and Blalock (1999) who stated that “regardless of what other factors may be involved, the interpersonal context affects greatly whether a person becomes depressed, the person’s subjective experience while depressed, and

the behavioral manifestations and resolution of the disorder. Consideration of the interpersonal context is simply a necessity for an adequate account of the disorder” (p. 3). As we will show in this section of the chapter, in many cases the interpersonal context of depression starts in childhood through early parent–child interactions. The effects of, and in some cases antecedents to, depression are also evident in the whole family system as well as the marital subsystem.

Depression and Family of Origin Experiences

Aversive family experiences during the formative years predispose people to developing depression later in life. Many people with depression seem to have experienced difficulties in their families when growing up—more so than what would be expected by chance alone. People who are depressed typically describe their family of origin as rejecting (Lewinsohn & Rosenbaum, 1987) and uncaring (Gotlib, Mount, Cordy, & Whiffen, 1988; Rodriguez et al., 1996). Reports of low parental care coupled with overprotection are common among people with depression (Parker, 1983; Sheeber, Hops, & Davis, 2001). Parker found depressed outpatients to be 3.4 times more likely than matched control subjects to have at least one parent who exhibited low care coupled with high protection, or “affectionless control.” In another investigation, exposure to affectionless control as a child was associated with a fivefold increase in the likelihood of having major depressive disorder 20 years later (Pilowsky et al., 2006). Parental affectionless control appears to impart risk for depression in offspring by creating maladaptive cognitive patterns such as low self-esteem, self-criticism, and a self-blaming, and defeating inferential style (Alloy, Abramson, Smith, Gibb, & Neeren, 2006). That is to say that children internalize this experience and it influences the way that they think about themselves and their world in such a way as to promote subsequent depression.

High levels of conflict are also evident in the family backgrounds of many people with depression (Gilman, Kawachi, Fitzmaurice, & Buka, 2003; Meyerson, Long, Miranda, & Marx, 2002; Sheeber et al., 2001). One way that family conflict seems to elevate the risk of childhood depression is through weaker attachment to parents (Constantine, 2006). Constantine found that when there was high family conflict, trust and communication with the parent suffered, and alienation from the parent increased. Collectively, these indicators of poor parental attachment appear to set the stage for depression in the child. Constantine’s theoretical model is depicted schematically in Figure 14.1.

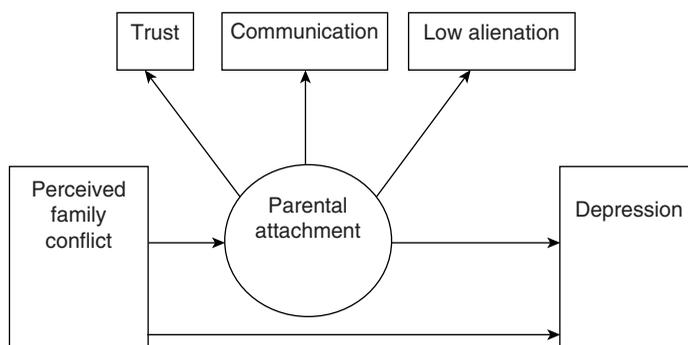


Figure 14.1 Constantine’s model of family conflict, attachment, and depression.

Note. From Constantine, M.G. (2006). Perceived family conflict, parental attachment, and depression in African American female adolescents. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 12*, 697–709. Published by the American Psychological Association and reprinted with permission.

Communication researchers Paul Schrodtt and Tamara Affifi identified a unique process that links family conflict and depressive symptoms in young adult children. When children witness destructive conflict between their parents, they sometimes feel caught in the middle, and this in turn predicts depressive symptoms (Schrodtt & Affifi, 2007). Feeling caught is a form of triangulation whereby children are drawn into parental conflicts often with a torn sense of loyalties. This phenomenon appears to be an important and stressful family process that connects parental conflict with offspring depression.

Very low or very high levels of family cohesion, to the point of enmeshment, also predispose people to develop depression (Jewell & Stark, 2003; Meyerson et al., 2002). Recall from chapter 1 that the most functional families are those with balanced or moderate levels of cohesion. Children in families with low cohesion often do not feel connected to or cared for by their parents. In enmeshed families, the emotional well-being of the parent and child are so strongly linked that issues that are upsetting to a parent invariably upset and distress the child. Low family cohesion has been documented as a particularly powerful predictor of adolescent depression in African American families (Herman, Ostrander, & Tucker, 2007). It is interesting that Herman et al. did not find low family cohesion to be as strong of a predictor of adolescent depression in European American families, but rather it was high family conflict that predicted depression in these adolescents.

One particularly noxious family communication pattern occurs when the father acts to maintain high conformity in the family and the mother communicates high expectations. This family interaction pattern is predictive of suicidal ideation in young adults (Miller & Day, 2002), an obvious indicator of their depression. Related findings reveal an association between offspring depressive symptoms and lack of available social support from family members (Segrin, 2003), low levels of parental confirmation (i.e., parental communication of value and esteem to the child) (Schrodtt, Ledbetter, & Ohrt, 2007), and low levels of parental acceptance and high levels of parental criticism (Herr, Hammen, & Brennan, 2007). Collectively, it appears that family environments that are restrictive and that do not communicate support, acceptance, and confirmation to the children are particularly prone to produce offspring who have problems with depression.

Emotional, physical, and sexual abuse all are forms of child maltreatment that dramatically increase the risk for developing depression later in life (Alloy et al., 2006; Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Smailes, 1999; Meyerson et al., 2002; Sachs-Ericsson, Kendall-Tackett, & Hernandez, 2007). Child abuse has unusually pernicious effects on the psychological well-being of young people because it functions as a double threat for vulnerability to depression (Harkness, Lumley, & Truss, 2008). First, abuse makes people more sensitive to stressors that can trigger an episode of depression. Second, abuse seems to create a propensity among its survivors to experience even more interpersonal stressors such as break-ups with boyfriends/girlfriends and fights with friends, once the person is depressed (Harkness et al., 2008). This is known as the stress generation effect and is one of the reasons why people with depression may stay depressed or have recurrent episodes. Rose and Abramson (1992) argued that emotional abuse might be particularly harmful to the psychological well-being of children because of the directness with which it communicates negative information to the child. Emotionally abusive parents will often directly supply the child with dysfunctional beliefs (e.g., “You are so stupid,” “No one will ever want to be friends with you,” “You don’t deserve anything”) that are exceptionally damaging to psychological well-being. In contrast, the child has to make these inferences him- or herself in cases of physical and sexual abuse.

Understandably, some people who are currently depressed might recall their childhood experiences in the family more negatively than they really were. However, the evidence of troubled family of origin experiences is too pervasive to simply dismiss these research findings to an artifact of memory bias. For many people, distressed family of origin experiences are at least a distal cause of their depression, if not *the* proximal cause.

According to the social skills deficit hypothesis (Lewinsohn, 1974; Segrin, 2000) people who lack adequate social skills are at risk of developing depression because of their inability to create positive social experiences and avoid negative social experiences. One of the primary environments in which children learn communication skills is the family of origin (Burlleson, Delia, & Applegate, 1995; Burlleson & Kunkel, 2002). Consequently, parents who fail to properly teach or model effective communication skills to their children might inadvertently make those children vulnerable to subsequent depression. Fortunately, by early adulthood most children's social skills develop independently of their parents (Segrin, 1994) so this vulnerability need not be long-lasting.

Parental Depression and Interactions with Children

Parenthood is a vital family role that is adversely affected by depression. The experience of depression goes hand in hand with a variety of dysfunctional parenting behaviors (e.g., Hamilton, Jones, & Hammen, 1993; Hammen et al., 1987). Chiariello and Orvaschel (1995) explained that depression interferes with parenting skills by corrupting parents' capacity to relate to their children. In general, the social behavior of depressed parents is characterized by similar negativity, hostility, complaining, and poor interpersonal problem solving that is associated with their other relationships. For instance, the communication between depressed mothers and their children is more negative and less positive than that of nondepressed mothers (Hamilton et al., 1993; Park, Garber, Ciesla, & Ellis, 2008). The same holds for depression in fathers—they exhibit fewer positive (e.g., affectionate, sensitive, supportive, positively accepting) and more negative (e.g., hostile, coercive, intrusive, restrictive, controlling, and critical) behaviors than nondepressed fathers do (Wilson & Durbin, 2010). Family interactions with a depressed father are also marked by *positivity suppression*; that is the tendency for a positive message (e.g., agree, approve, smile, and laugh) by one family member to be met with either a negative (e.g., criticize, disagree, put down) or problem solving (e.g., question, command, solution) message by other family members (Jacob & Johnson, 2001).

Children of depressed mothers typically exhibit a behavioral pattern indicative of rejection. During interaction with their depressed parent, young children express negative affect, are generally tense and irritable, spend less time looking at their parent, and appear less content than children who interact with their nondepressed parent (e.g., Cohn, Campbell, Matias, & Hopkins, 1990; Field, 1984). This agitation is at least partly due to the fact that parents with depression are notoriously unresponsive to their young children during interaction. Children's irritability might be an attempt to capture their depressed parent's attention.

Given what is known about the parenting behavior of people with depression, it is perhaps understandable that the children of depressed parents are at a much higher risk for behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dysfunction than those of nondepressed parents (e.g., Lee & Gotlib, 1991; see Downey & Coyne, 1990, and Gelfand & Teti, 1990, for reviews). It is common for children of depressed parents to also experience depression (Hammen et al., 1987; Warner, Weissman, Fendrich, Wickramaratne, & Moreau, 1992). In fact, children are 4–8 times more likely to experience depression if they have a depressed parent than if neither of their parents are depressed (Nomura, Wickramaratne, Warner, Mufson, & Weissman, 2002; Pilowsky, Wickramaratne, Nomura, & Weissman, 2006). One possible reason for this elevated risk of depression is that the offspring of depressed parents tend to be exposed to a high level of family discord, which is stressful to youth, in addition to poor role models (i.e., the depressed parents) for managing interpersonal conflict (Hammen, Brennan, & Shih, 2004). This combination of factors is thought to hinder the development of social competence in youth, which then creates a risk for subsequent depression. Children with a depressed parent are also more likely to have been exposed to low family cohesion, affectionless control (i.e., low caring/warmth coupled with overprotectiveness), and poor marital adjustment (Normura et al.; Pilowsky et al.). Naturally, these aversive family dynamics could contribute to the increased risk for depression

in offspring. As Jacob and Johnson (2001) plainly stated, “family communication could be one of the channels promoting the increased risk of depression among children of depressed parents” (p. 39).

Depression and Marital Interaction

Depression is strongly associated with problems in marital interactions and relationships (see Beach, 2001; Beach, Sandeen, & O’Leary, 1990; Coyne, Kahn, & Gotlib, 1987, for reviews). Repeatedly, this research has shown that depression and marital distress go hand in hand (Beach & O’Leary, 1993; Beach et al., 1990). About 50% of all women in distressed marriages are depressed (Beach, Jouriles, & O’Leary, 1985), and 50–60% of all depressed women are in distressed marriages (Coyne, Thompson, & Palmer, 2002; Rounsaville, Weissman, Prusoff, & Herceg-Baron, 1979). As depressive symptoms worsen or improve, so too does relationship quality with the spouse (Judd et al., 2000). Similarly, marriages that have an upward trajectory of satisfaction over time ordinarily have spouses whose depressive symptoms decline over time (Dush, Taylor, & Kroger, 2008).

The communication between depressed people and their spouses is often negative in tone and tends to generate negative affect in each spouse (Gotlib & Whiffen, 1989; Kahn, Coyne, & Margolin, 1985; Ruscher & Gotlib, 1988). This negative affect often takes the form of anger and hostility (Goldman & Haaga, 1995). McCabe and Gotlib (1993) showed that over the course of a marital interaction, the verbal behavior of depressed wives becomes increasingly negative. Other investigations of marital interaction find depression to be associated with poor communication during problem solving interactions (Basco, Prager, Pite, Tamir, & Stephens, 1992), negative self-evaluations and statements of negative well-being (Hautzinger, Linden, & Hoffman, 1982; Linden, Hautzinger, & Hoffman, 1983), verbal aggressiveness (Segrin & Fitzpatrick, 1992), and problems in establishing intimacy (Basco et al., 1992). Given all of these negative communication behaviors and marital problems, it is easy to understand why depression and marital distress are so powerfully related.

Just as in maritally distressed couples, a history of depression is associated with less positive reciprocity in marital interaction (Johnson & Jacob, 2000). In other words, depressed spouses are less likely to follow their partners’ positive communication with positive messages of their own. Johnson and Jacob further discovered that when depressed husbands make positive contributions to conversations, their wives respond with negativity. Consistent with the assumptions of systems theory, this pattern illustrates how all members of an interpersonal system might contribute to and maintain a member’s depression.

Not surprisingly, marital conflict is a key problem for depressed spouses. Depressed wives report more frequent arguments than nondepressed wives and that their husbands do not understand or respect them (Coyne et al., 2002). As one might expect, the husbands of these depressed wives had complaints of their own. They too reported frequent arguments and complained that their depressed wives blamed them for everything that goes wrong, lacked ambition, and that their wives depended too much on them. During conflict resolution interactions, there are more negative messages sent from and directed to the person with depression than what is seen in nondepressed married couples (Sher & Baucom, 1993). The specific communication of depressed spouses during conflict resolution includes a lot of self-complaints, sadness, slowed speech and monotone vocal cues, whining, and despondent expressions (Jackman-Cram, Dobson, & Martin, 2006). At a minimum, one would have to assume that this makes conflict resolution very unpleasant in marriages with a depressed spouse. In marriage, at least part of the negative effect of depression on marital satisfaction comes through dysfunctional conflict patterns, specifically demand/withdrawal, avoidance, and lower levels of constructive communication (Heene, Buisse, & Van Oost, 2005, 2007). Relatively high levels of husband demand/wife withdraw interactions are positively associated with both husbands’ and wives’ depressive symptoms (Papp, Kouros, & Cummings, 2009). Highlighting

the corrosive effects of the withdrawal part of the demand/withdrawal conflict pattern, Whiffen, Foot, and Thompson (2007) found that marital conflict is sometimes associated with “self-silencing” that in turn promotes depression. Self-silencing occurs when people hide their anger and try not to speak their minds for fear of disrupting the relationship. This sort of withdrawal from conflict is most evident when people with depression are in an acutely sad mood state (Rehman, Ginting, Karimiha, & Goodnight, 2010). Obviously, withdrawal from conflict when sad and subjugation of one’s own concerns could be beneficial in some short term situations, but as an enduring relationship dynamic this withdrawal from conflict takes a serious toll in the form of depressive symptoms.

Another relationship issue that sometimes links depression with marital distress is the haste with which young depressed people marry (Gotlib, Lewinsohn, & Seeley, 1998). Results from Gotlib et al.’s extensive longitudinal investigation reveal that depression among adolescents predicts higher rates of marriage among younger women, diminished marital satisfaction, and increased marital disagreements. It is possible that depression motivates young people to seek out marriage, perhaps indiscriminately, as a solution to problems. Not surprisingly, such marriages are often doomed to failure.

What effect does one spouse’s depression have on the other spouse? Husbands and wives who are married to a person with depression must deal with a significant burden, and often experience clinical levels of depression themselves (e.g., Benazon & Coyne, 2000; Coyne, Kessler, et al., 1987). Wives’ depression in particular seems to be negatively affected by their husbands’ depression (Stimpson, Peek, & Markides, 2006). Living with a depressed person leads to profound family transformations, as spouses and other family members attempt to cope with and understand the symptoms of the disorder (Badger, 1996a, 1996b). Badger (1996a) conceptualized the stages of family transformation brought about by depression as “acknowledging the strangers within” (e.g., searching for reasons and solutions, living two lives), “fighting the battle” (e.g., reducing conflict, seeking social support, demanding change), and “gaining a new perspective” (e.g., refocusing on others, redesigning the relationship).

Before jumping to any conclusions that spouses of people with depression are just the unfortunate recipients of their partner’s depressive behaviors, recall the family systems perspective (chapter 2), which suggests that the effects of depression on spouses are not unidirectional. Rather, spouses might introduce issues of their own into the marriage that agitate or maintain the depression of their partner. Coyne, Downey, and Boergers (1992) note that “family systems associated with depression can be characterized by a lack of coherence and agency and a general emotional dysregulation. . . so that negative interactions are not repaired, disagreements are not resolved, negative affect becomes contagious, and there is little chance for negative affect to be transformed into positive affect” (pp. 228, 230). From this perspective, both the depressed individual and his or her spouse are seen as active participants in creating a dysfunctional marriage, each acting on and reacting to the other. For example, sometimes depressed persons and their spouses get caught in dysfunctional vicious cycles of interaction (Biglan et al., 1985; Hops et al., 1987). This research shows that people with depression are often “rewarded” by their spouses for emitting depressive behaviors. In other words, acting depressed tends to inhibit the hostile and irritable behaviors of the spouse (see also Nelson & Beach, 1990). When depressed people learn that their complaints and whining will be met with conciliatory responses from their spouse, it is no surprise that they continue to display more depressive behaviors. Even though depression has ill effects on spouses, these same spouses might actually play a role in causing or maintaining the depressive behavior of the afflicted partner.

LONELINESS

Loneliness is a discrepancy between a person’s desired and achieved level of social interaction (Peplau, Russell, & Heim, 1979). In other words, people who are lonely long for more and

better social relationships than what they perceive to be available. Even though loneliness is not formally recognized as a psychiatric disorder, it is a psychosocial problem that can be very distressing. Because of its comparability to problems such as depression and its potential role in other problems such as alcoholism and schizophrenia, we will briefly examine the role of family interaction in loneliness.

In general, loneliness is negatively associated with perceived social support from the family (Perlman & Rook, 1987; Segrin, 2003) as well as family cohesiveness (Rich & Bonner, 1987). However, within certain subpopulations, family social support does little to ameliorate feelings of loneliness. Young adults, for example, are keen to develop intimate friendships. Social support from family members can do little to replace interactions with peers. In fact, Jones and Moore (1990) found that the more social support students had from their family, the *more* lonely they were. A related finding shows that very close family relationships may be a set up for future loneliness (Andersson, Mullins, & Johnson, 1990). Retrospective reports of early childhood experiences indicate that people who had an excessively close, warm, and nurturing relationship with at least one parent were significantly *more* lonely as elderly adults than a group of controls. Andersson et al. concluded that the effects of overinvolvement from parents can be as noxious as underinvolvement or neglect when it comes to producing lonely children. This is due in part to the fact that parental overinvolvement can create a sense of narcissism in the child that leads to interpersonal difficulties later in life. Among older adults, contact with friends and neighbors does much more to prevent loneliness than contact with family members, especially adult children (Mullins, Elston, & Gutkowski, 1996; Pinquart & Sorensen, 2001). Contact with family members only seems to play a role in reducing loneliness in later adulthood when elderly people are divorced, widowed, or never married (Pinquart, 2003).

It makes sense that the availability of social support can at least sometimes help to keep feelings of loneliness at bay. It is a lesser known fact however that *providing* social support to family members can also help to minimize loneliness in some cases. Among middle aged and elderly men, providing emotional support to children is negatively associated with feelings of loneliness (Stevens & Westerhof, 2006a). Married older adults who provide more instrumental support (e.g., help with tasks) to their spouses also tend to experience less loneliness than those who do not provide as much of this support (de Jong Gierveld, van Groenou, Hoogendoorn, & Smit, 2009). It is possible that performing this family function creates a feeling of self-worth and helps to solidify bonds with other family members.

There are certain family processes that seem to be conducive to loneliness. Children's loneliness tends to be positively correlated with their parents' loneliness (Henwood & Solano, 1994; Lobdell & Perlman, 1986), indicating that parents might transmit their loneliness to their children through lack of positive involvement in childrearing practices. Family conflict is also positively associated with loneliness (Johnson, LaVoie, & Mahoney, 2001; Ponzetti & James, 1997), and healthy family communication and emotional bonding are negatively associated with loneliness in young people (Uruk & Demir, 2003). Family structure can affect loneliness in that children from single parent and stepfamily households are lonelier than those from intact families (Antognoli-Toland, 2001). Also, internet addicts beware: Heavy use of the internet leads to declines in family communication and increases in loneliness (Kraut et al., 1998). It is paradoxical that a technology that allows for greater opportunity for communication should cause greater loneliness, but the displacement of face-to-face interaction appears to have undeniable consequences.

Finally, loneliness is a fairly accurate barometer of marital quality. For the most part, marriage helps protect people from the experience of loneliness, especially when there is good cohesion in the dyad (Olson & Wong, 2001; Stack, 1998). Even when married couples live under austere conditions such as long-term separation due to imprisonment, maintaining a psychological closeness to the spouse can help to prevent loneliness (Segrin & Flora, 2001). However, when marriages go bad, people often become lonely. Recall from chapter 12 that loneliness is the final stage in Gottman's (1994) distance and isolation cascade leading up to

marital dissolution. About 1 in 5 married older adults experience moderate to strong levels of loneliness (de Jong Gierveld et al., 2009). What is particularly distressing about being lonely and married is that it is such a powerful violation of expectations.

As one might expect, marital communication patterns play an important role in the experience of loneliness in the married population. Marriages marked by conflict, a lot of disagreement, or very little conversation among spouses tend to be those that harbor lonely spouses (de Jong Gierveld et al., 2009; Dykstra & Fokkema, 2007). In contrast, couples with a strong marital bond, who express positive perceptions of their spouse and marriage as they talk about the relationship, tend to have the lowest levels of loneliness (Doohan, Carrère, & Riggs, 2010). Also, companionship with the spouse and receipt of emotional support from a spouse can both lessen the experience of loneliness among married people (Stevens & Westerhof, 2006b). These marital communication behaviors may be particularly consequential to husbands' experience of loneliness as they rely more extensively on their partners, whereas wives tend to maintain more varied social networks to which they can turn in hard times to help combat feelings of loneliness (Stevens & Westerhof).

SCHIZOPHRENIA

Definition

Schizophrenia is a formal thought disorder with various subtypes characterized by symptoms such as bizarre delusions, hallucinations, disorganized speech, grossly disorganized or catatonic behavior, inability to initiate and persist in goal-directed activity, affective flattening, and impoverished and disorganized thinking evident in speech and language behavior (DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Such symptoms must be present for at least a month, but in some cases may persist for years. An important diagnostic criterion for schizophrenia is social/occupational dysfunction.

Schizophrenia was the first mental health problem to attract intense theorizing and research on the role of family interactions. Some used to think that schizophrenia was the result of disturbed family interactions. Today, most scholars feel that troubled family communication patterns interact with preexisting vulnerabilities to bring about the disorder and that in some cases family communication influences the course of the disorder. In this section we explore three family communication variables that have been, and continue to be, particularly influential in theory and research on schizophrenia. These are *communication deviance*, *expressed emotion*, and *family affective style*.

Communication Deviance

Early research on family interaction and schizophrenia revealed that patients' families often exhibited odd and unfocused styles of interacting with each other. Family members seemed to have difficulty establishing and maintaining a shared focus of attention through their discourse. Out of this early theorizing grew a very influential line of research on communication deviance (Miklowitz, 1994; Wynne, 1981). Wynne theorized that people learn to focus their attention and derive meaning from external stimuli through their interactions, particularly with parents, during the early years of life (Wynne, 1968, 1981). Odd and deviant styles of communication among the parents were presumed to interact with biological predispositions to contribute to thought and communication disturbances in children who were unable to relate to and understand their parents.

The communication in families with a schizophrenic member is characterized by odd, idiosyncratic, illogical, and fragmented language, even when the mentally ill family member is not present. Topics of conversation will often drift or abruptly change direction with a lack of

closure. Such interactions are marked by a blurred focus of attention and meaning. This characteristic style of family communication has been labeled “communication deviance” (CD; Singer, Wynne, & Toohey, 1978). Traditionally, CD has been assessed from transcripts of parents’ responses to various projective tests such as the Rorschach or Thematic Apperception Test. These call for interpretations of ambiguous images presented on cards. A well-developed coding scheme classifies parents’ communication behavior into such categories as *idea fragments, contradictions and retractions, ambiguous references* (Jones, 1977). More recently, scientists have measured CD based on communication during family problem solving discussions (e.g., Velligan, Funderburg, Giesecke, & Miller, 1995; Velligan et al., 1996). This measure, referred to as interactional communication deviance (ICD), has similar categories. A complete index of the categories and their definitions for both the projective test and family interaction procedures is provided in Tables 14.1 and 14.2.

Research studies indicate that CD is higher in parents of schizophrenia patients than it is in parents of either nonschizophrenic patients or healthy controls (e.g., Miklowitz, 1994; Miklowitz, Goldstein, & Neuchterlein, 1995). This work shows that aspects of parental communication deviance such as idea abandonments, extraneous remarks, and ambiguous references distinguish parents of schizophrenia patients (Miklowitz et al., 1991). It is intriguing that this distorted form of communication is very similar in style to the communication of the person who actually has schizophrenia.

An exciting development in CD research is the recognition that this form of family communication can predict the onset of schizophrenia. Research by Goldstein and his colleagues indicates that parental CD often precedes onset and is therefore an excellent predictor of schizophrenia among adolescents who have yet to develop the disorder (Goldstein, 1981, 1987; Goldstein & Strachan, 1987). In one such study parents from families with a moderately disturbed teenager each responded to TAT protocols, from which measures of CD were taken (Goldstein, 1985). High CD in the parents was strongly associated with

Table 14.1 Thematic apperception test communication deviance scoring system

| <i>Factor</i> | <i>Definition</i> | <i>Examples</i> |
|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| Contorted, peculiar language | Off-word usage, peculiar phrases; excessive verbiage | “They’re trying to <i>make a goal of their life.</i> ” “This man is <i>in the process of thinking of the process of being a doctor.</i> ” |
| Misinterpretations | Gross uncertainty about percepts; attributions of intention in the TAT cards, confusion about stimuli | “Is this a boy or a girl?” “This must be the artist’s rendering of societal progression.” |
| Flighty anxiety | Short reaction times; off-task questions and comments | “When do we finish?” |
| Overpersonalized closure problems | Stories left hanging; overly personalized associations | “This was me as a child.” |
| Faulty overintellectualization | Unusual task set; complicated words used incorrectly | “He wouldn’t do that <i>facetiously.</i> ” |
| Failure to integrate closure problems | Important perceptual elements ignored; no integration of elements; “I don’t know” endings | “These people have nothing to do with each other.” |

Note. From Miklowitz, D.J., Velligan, D.I., Goldstein, M.J., Nuechterlein, K.H., Gitlin, M.J., Ranlett, G., & Doane, J.A. (1991). Communication deviance in families of schizophrenic and manic patients. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 100*, 163–173. Published by the American Psychological Association and adapted with permission.

Table 14.2 Interactional communication deviance scoring system

| <i>ICD Code</i> | <i>Definition</i> | <i>Examples</i> |
|---|--|--|
| Idea fragments | Speaker abandons ideas or abruptly ends comments without returning to them | “But the thing is as I said, <i>there’s got ...</i> you can’t drive in the alley.” |
| Unintelligible remarks | Comments are incomprehensible in the context of conversation | “Well, that’s just <i>probably a real closing spot.</i> ” |
| Contradictions or retractions | Speaker contradicts earlier statements or presents mutually inconsistent alternatives | “No, that’s right, she does.” |
| Ambiguous references | Speaker uses sentences with no clear object of discussion | “Kid stuff that’s one thing but <i>something else</i> is different too.” |
| Extraneous remarks | Speaker makes off-task comments | “I wonder how many rooms they have like this?” |
| Tangential inappropriate responses | Non sequitur replies or speaker does not acknowledge others’ statements | Patient: “Sometimes I work on the back yard.” Mother: “Let’s talk about your schoolwork.” |
| Odd Word usage or odd sentence construction | Speaker uses words in odd ways, leaves out words, puts words out of order, uses many unnecessary words | “It’s gonna be <i>up and downwards along the process all the while</i> to go through something like this.” |

Note. From Miklowitz, D.J., Velligan, D.I., Goldstein, M.J., Nuechterlein, K.H., Gitlin, M.J., Ranlett, G., & Doane, J.A. (1991). Communication deviance in families of schizophrenic and manic patients. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 100*, 163–173. Published by the American Psychological Association and adapted with permission.

the appearance of schizophrenia-spectrum disorders in some of the family offspring at 15-year follow-up. In a similar study, disturbed high-risk adolescents were followed over a period of 5 years (Doane, West, Goldstein, Rodnick, & Jones, 1981). By the end of the study, approximately 10% of those whose parents who were low or intermediate in CD went on to develop schizophrenia, whereas 56% of those whose parents were high in CD developed schizophrenia.

Family CD also appears to influence the course of schizophrenia. For example, Velligan et al. (1996) followed a group of schizophrenia patients and their parents for one year. During the study, slightly over 50% of the patients had experienced a relapse. Parental CD at the time of the patient’s discharge was significantly higher in the families of those who relapsed versus those who did not. However, looking back to the assessment of parental CD at time 1, there were no differences among parents of those who relapsed versus those who did not. As it turns out, the parents of those patients who relapsed exhibited a dramatic increase in their CD over the course of the study. This investigation indicates that returning to a home with high CD will increase the likelihood of relapse.

Family communication deviance may be triggered by different family processes in different cultural groups. A detailed analysis of family discussions showed that White, Black, and Latino families of patients with schizophrenia expressed communication deviance around different themes (Kymalainen, Weisman, Rosales, & Armesto, 2006). Specifically, White families tended to engage in CD when discussing the patient’s lack of self-sufficiency and the patient’s troublesome symptoms. In contrast, Black families were more inclined to exhibit CD when experiencing distress about not recognizing the symptoms of schizophrenia sooner and wanting to help the patient, as well as when expressing concern over the patient’s decline in social functioning. Finally, Latino families showed most CD when discussing their concerns over symptoms and preventing relapse, in addition to their desire to maintain harmony in the

home and manage the patient's aggressiveness. These may well be "hot button" issues in these families of different cultural backgrounds, such that when discussing them, family members become emotionally charged and the coherence of their communication breaks down.

Parental communication deviance functions as a type of stressor that affects the course and outcome of schizophrenia. When parents' communication is particularly amorphous and peculiar, children may become confused and uncertain about even basic and fundamental social realities. This confusion undoubtedly has functional significance in the course of the schizophrenia as it is so central in the constellation of symptoms that make up the disorder. The communication of high CD parents raises substantial questions about their own mental health. It is therefore understandable that when discharged into the care of such individuals, their offspring remain at risk for future relapse.

Expressed Emotion

Family expressed emotion (EE; Brown, Monck, Carstairs, & Wing, 1962; Vaughn & Leff, 1976) is a pattern of criticism, overinvolvement, overprotectiveness, excessive attention, and emotional reactivity that creates a vulnerability to relapse and poor social adjustment among schizophrenia patients (see Hooley & Hiller, 1997, 1998, for reviews). EE represents an attitude of criticism and emotional overinvolvement on the part of the parent. EE is measured through the frequency of critical remarks, degree of hostility, and the degree of emotional overinvolvement expressed by a family member during an interview.

Vaughn and Leff (1981) described EE as a combination of four behavioral characteristics: intrusiveness, anger and/or acute distress and anxiety, overt blame and criticism of the patient, and an intolerance of the patient's symptoms (Vaughn & Leff, 1981). One of Vaughn and Leff's early studies revealed that patients who returned to a home with high EE relatives exhibited a 9-month relapse rate of 51%, whereas only 13% of those who returned to a low EE family relapsed (Vaughn & Leff, 1976). Rosenfarb and his colleagues examined the functioning of a sample of young and recently discharged schizophrenia patients who returned to either high or low expressed emotion families (Rosenfarb, Goldstein, Mintz, & Nuechterlein, 1995). Recently discharged patients living in high EE families exhibited more odd and disruptive behavior during a family interaction than did patients from low EE households. Relatives in the high EE households were more critical when the patients verbalized unusual thoughts than were members of low EE families. Thus, there appears to be a vicious circle in high EE family relations: Parents respond to the patient with a lot of criticism because patients from these households appear to exhibit more bizarre and disruptive behavior than patients from low EE homes. It is likely that the negative reactions they receive from their families contribute further to the potential for relapse among patients. Indeed, a review of 25 studies on family EE indicated a 50% relapse rate, over a period of 9–12 months, among schizophrenia patients discharged to a high EE family, but only 21% among those with low EE relatives (Bebbington & Kuipers, 1994). These findings indicate that the odds of relapse are increased by approximately 2.5:1 for those patients discharged to high versus low EE relatives.

Like CD, the form and function of EE differs somewhat among families of different ethnicities. It has been argued for example that some of the communication behaviors indicative of conflict or overinvolvement in White families may not be experienced that way in Black families (Kymalainen & de Mamani, 2008). In White families, low levels of EE, especially critical and intrusive behavior, are ordinarily associated with better outcomes for the relative with schizophrenia. However, among Black families, the pattern appears to be the exact opposite: Better outcomes are associated with higher levels of critical and intrusive behaviors (Rosenfarb, Bellack, & Aziz, 2006). Rosenfarb et al. concluded that some of the seemingly negative behaviors reflective of EE are actually viewed as signs of caring and concern in African American families. This may be due in part to the fact that family members with schizophrenia are not viewed as a burden to the same extent in African American families as they are in White

families (Rosenfarb, Bellack, & Aziz, 2006) and so EE in Black families must be understood in this more general context of acceptance.

Comparisons of Anglo and Latino families have also revealed interesting differences in expressed emotion. Among Mexican American families, warmth expressed in family interactions is a strong predictor of positive outcomes for the patient with schizophrenia, whereas in Anglo American families, family criticism is the strongest predictor of negative outcomes (Lopez et al., 2004). Interestingly, family criticism does not appear to be a strong predictor of the patient's complications in Mexican American families. When families of people with schizophrenia express criticism it is in response to matters that bring shame to the family within Mexican American families, whereas Anglo American families become more critical when expressing their desire to see the patient engage in more productive behavior (Kymalainen & de Mamani, 2008). Mexican American families that are high in EE are more likely to have relatives who relapse in comparison to low EE families (Kopelowicz et al., 2006). Kopelowicz et al. found that among these Mexican American families, EE was most evident in emotional overinvolvement and criticism. In many Mexican American families, high EE appears to be an expression of low acceptance (Dorian, Garcia, Lopez, & Hernandez, 2008). It is likely that this family dynamic is particularly stressful for the Latino/a with schizophrenia as it is so counter to the cultural value of *familismo* that is pervasive in Mexican American families. However, overall, White families of patients with schizophrenia tend to exhibit more EE compared to Latino families (de Mamani, Kymalainen, Rosales, & Armesto, 2007).

In addition to being a useful and reliable predictor of relapse, EE may also be fruitfully understood as a familial risk indicator for schizophrenia (Miklowitz, 1994). Even people with no history of schizophrenia are at elevated risk for developing the disorder if reared in an environment characterized by high EE. In each case one could interpret the family EE as a stressor on the patient (Hooley & Hiller, 1998). With that said, it is clear that EE functions differently in families of different ethnicities.

Affective Style

Affective style (AS) is a measure of the verbal behavior of family members during discussion of a conflict-laden issue with the patient present. AS represents family members' actual verbal behaviors when interacting with the patient. It could be thought of as the behavioral manifestation of expressed emotion. Although AS and EE are closely related and perhaps overlapping constructs, a distinct body of literature exists on AS indicating that like EE it is often predictive of relapse among schizophrenia patients.

Affective style is typically measured from a series of brief discussions about a current unresolved problem in the family (Doane et al., 1981). As might be expected, these conversations pull for substantial emotional expression. The conversations are then transcribed and family members' speech is classified into the categories of support (e.g., "I want you to know I care about you"), criticism (e.g., "You have an ugly, arrogant attitude"), guilt induction (e.g., "You cause our family an awful lot of trouble"), and intrusiveness, which implies knowledge of the child's thoughts ("You enjoy being mean to others") (Doane et al., 1981). Based on this coding, families are classified into one of three AS profiles: benign, intermediate, or poor. Benign AS families display a lack of negative behaviors (i.e., personal criticism, guilt induction, and critical or neutral intrusiveness) during their interactions. Intermediate AS families are those who express some negative but some positive speech behaviors (i.e., primary support) during the family discussion. Poor (also referred to as negative) AS families are those in which one or both parents exhibit negative verbal behaviors but no positive verbal behaviors.

In one of the premier AS studies (Doane et al., 1981), 65 families of high risk disturbed but not psychotic adolescents participated in the family conflict discussion. Then the adolescents were assessed five years later. Only 8% of those with a benign family AS profile at time 1 received a schizophrenia spectrum diagnosis at time 2. Among those with an intermediate

family AS profile at time 1, 50% were diagnosed at time 2. This figure increased to 59% among those with poor AS profile families. A comparable 15-year longitudinal study by Goldstein (1985) revealed no cases of schizophrenia developing over the course of the study among people from benign families. However, almost all of the schizophrenia cases emerged in the context of a family where one or both parents were high in EE and had a negative AS. Clearly, family AS is a marker of risk for schizophrenia.

In addition to predicting the development of schizophrenia AS may also predict relapse. In one study, schizophrenia patients discharged to families with benign AS profiles had a 40% rehospitalization rate over the next 12 months, whereas those who returned to negative AS families had twice the rate (83%) of rehospitalization (Doane & Becker, 1993). Even more striking are the findings for AS in concert with medication compliance: Patients with negative AS families and noncompliance with medication exhibited a 100% rehospitalization rate, compared with only 17% among those with a benign family AS profile and medication compliance.

Families with a negative AS profile appear to stir up and bring about anxious/agitated and hostile/unusual behavior in the patient with schizophrenia (Woo, Goldstein, & Nuechterlin, 2004). Woo found that she and her student research assistant could actually see increases in these pathological behaviors being exhibited by patients of families with negative AS profiles during brief family interactions. Findings such as these show how AS can agitate schizophrenia patients and complicate the expression and courses of their mental health problems.

Family affective style appears to have a relationship with both the onset and course of schizophrenia. Like CD or EE, a negative family AS must be stressful for children on the receiving end of the criticism, intrusiveness, and guilt induction. For many at risk children with preexisting vulnerabilities, these family communication behaviors might push them over the psychological edge into full blown mental illness, or relapse into an active episode of schizophrenia.

EATING DISORDERS

Definition

The American Psychiatric Association recognizes two distinct subtypes of eating disorders: Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). The defining features of Anorexia Nervosa include a refusal to maintain a normal body weight, an intense fear of gaining weight, and a disturbance in body image perception. Bulimia Nervosa is defined by recurrent episodes of uncontrolled binge eating, inappropriate compensatory behaviors to control weight gain (e.g., self-induced vomiting, misuse of laxatives or diuretics), and an undue influence of body shape and weight on self-evaluations. The primary difference between the two disorders is that individuals with Bulimia Nervosa are able to maintain their body weight at or above normally prescribed levels whereas people suffering from Anorexia Nervosa remain significantly underweight. Like most mental health problems, there is no single cause of eating disorders. In the past 25 years, family relationships and communication patterns have been a major emphasis of researchers' efforts to understand eating disorders (Kog & Vandereycken, 1985; Vandereycken, Kog, & Vanderlinden, 1989; Waller & Calam, 1994; Wonderlich, 1992). This research shows that there are multiple destructive family processes that go hand in hand with eating disorders.

Dysfunctional Family of Origin Interaction Patterns

Family systems theorist Salvador Minuchin was at that forefront of efforts to understand the origins of eating disorders through a focus on family interaction patterns (Minuchin,

Rosman, & Baker, 1978). Minuchin and his associates observed dysfunctional patterns of interaction among families with an Anorexia Nervosa patient that often minimized conflict and adaptability. Family systems researchers and clinicians see eating disorders as built into and around family relations. In a family systems perspective, disordered eating is understood to be caused and maintained by family interpersonal behavior, which itself is assumed to be influenced by the disordered eating of one of its members. In this section we highlight some of the many different family interaction variables that appear to play a role in eating disorders.

Systems-oriented researchers have emphasized family adaptability and cohesion as two dimensions of family relationships that are crucial to healthy family functioning, provided that neither are too extreme (Olson, 1993). People with eating disorders are often reared in environments of low *family cohesion* (Blouin, Zuro, & Blouin, 1990; Latzer, Hochdorf, Bachar, & Canetti, 2002; Steiger, Puentes-Neuman, & Leung, 1991; Waller, Slade, & Calam, 1990). In contrast, higher levels of family cohesion are associated with more healthy eating behaviors (e.g., eating breakfast, consuming less soda, consuming more fruits and vegetables) in adolescent girls (Franko, Thompson, Bauserman, Affenito, & Striegel-Moore, 2008). Although low family cohesion is often reported by young people with eating disorders as well as their parents (e.g., Attie & Brooks-Gunn, 1989; Waller et al., 1990), eating disordered children give lower ratings to their family's cohesiveness than their parents do (Dare, Le Grange, Eisler, & Rutherford, 1994; Hoste, Hewell, & le Grange, 2007). Regardless of which family member's perception is actually "correct," the fact that the parent and child with an eating disorder differ in their view of the family's cohesiveness says something about these family relationships.

Investigations of *family adaptability* have yielded less consistent results than those of cohesion. Some evidence indicates a negative association between family adaptability and symptoms of eating disorders (e.g., Dare et al., 1994; Waller et al., 1990). However, a collection of studies revealed more chaos, less organization, more inconsistent discipline, greater role reversal, and more poorly defined boundaries in families of girls with eating disorders or symptoms of eating disorders (Humphrey, 1986; Ross & Gill, 2002; Rowa, Kerig, & Geller, 2001). All of these patterns are suggestive of excessive adaptability. As in the case of cohesion, parents of young women with eating disorders do not feel that boundary violations are a problem in the family, in sharp contrast to perceptions of their daughters who readily report boundary problems (Rowa et al., 2001). In most studies, people with eating disorders seem to have been raised in a family that is marked by extreme levels of adaptability (either too much or too little), indicating potentially detrimental family relations.

Research on family interaction in schizophrenia identified a pattern of criticism, overinvolvement, overprotectiveness, and emotional reactivity in the discourse of family members related to a person with schizophrenia. This pattern of behavior is called *family expressed emotion* and it appears to also be an important family process variable in eating disorders as well (e.g., Hedlund, Fichter, Quadflieg, & Brandl, 2003; Le Grange, Eisler, Dare, & Hodes, 1992; van Furth et al., 1996). The van Furth et al. investigation indicated that maternal expressed emotion during family interactions with eating disordered patients was a powerful predictor of patients' eventual outcomes and responses to therapy. Mothers' openly critical comments during a family interaction assessment were a better predictor of patients' outcomes than a host of other predictors such as body weight prior to onset of the disorder, duration of illness, body mass index, and age at onset. Family expressed emotion may be problematic in part because it is associated with high levels of conflict and poorer levels of organization in families of people with eating disorders (Hedlund et al., 2003). The criticism element of expressed emotion is evident in studies which show that people at high risk for eating disorders tend to live with parents who are very critical, and they are often teased by their parents and siblings about their weight (MacBrayer, Smith, McCarthy, Demos, & Simmons, 2001; Polivy & Herman, 2002).

People with eating disorders sometimes experience *inappropriate parental pressure* (Horesh et al., 1996). Horesh et al. describe this phenomenon as “gender-inappropriate pressure, age-inappropriate pressure, and pressures inappropriate to the child’s abilities . . . the adolescents felt that they had been forced into an exaggerated feminine style of behavior, that their parents had discussed topics (such as parental sex) before the adolescents were prepared to deal with such subjects, and that the adolescents had been made to engage in activities which reflected their parents’ ambitions rather than their own” (p. 925). Horesh et al. hypothesized that the pressures for achievement at inappropriate developmental levels may lead to a counteraction from the child that is manifest in symptoms of eating disorders. Related to this, Levine’s (1996) study of eating disordered families found that the family environments were characterized by a strong emphasis on achievement/perfection and overconcern with beauty/appearance/thinness. High parental demands and perfectionism are severe risk factors in Anorexia Nervosa (Pike et al., 2007) and are associated with excessive exercising in people with Bulimia Nervosa (Haslam et al., 2008). It has been suggested that in some cases parents might project their own ambitions and ideals onto their children which sets up the struggles for control that contribute to disordered eating (Segrin, 2001b).

It is fairly common to find *stressful mealtime or food-related communication* in the family backgrounds of people with eating disorders. For example, the family might bicker a lot during meals or have very strict rules about meals, such as when they eat and how much each person is allowed to eat (Crowther, Kichler, Sherwood, & Kuhnert, 2002; Worobey, 2002). Hanna and Bond (2006) studied the effect of negative verbal messages from mothers about eating and weight (e.g., “You need to lose weight” and “If you eat that, you will get fat”). They found that these maternal communication behaviors accounted for about 10–20% of the variance in body dissatisfaction and 20–30% of the variance in bulimic symptoms in high school and university students. Critical comments from family members about amount of food eaten or physical appearance are risk factors for both anorexia and bulimia (Wade, Gillespie, & Martin, 2007). This type of communication and these restrictive family rules surrounding food have at least two pathologic consequences. First, they can teach children to obsess and ruminate about food, contributing to a preoccupation with food and eating, which is common to various eating disorders. Second, this could become a bizarre form of classical conditioning in which the association of food and conflict ultimately leads to feeling stressed out about food, even when the family conflict is not present. Dysfunctional attempts to cope with this stress might entail careful management and control of eating.

Other family process variables that have been implicated in eating disorders include *poor family problem solving* (McGrane & Carr, 2002), *disturbed affective expression* (Garfinkel et al., 1983; Waller, Calam, & Slade, 1989), *inconsistent parental reward and punishment of disordered eating behaviors* (Prescott & Le Poire, 2002), *lack of parental care* (Webster & Palmer, 2000), *excessive parental overprotectiveness and intrusiveness* (Calam, Waller, Slade, & Newton, 1990; Rhodes & Kroger, 1992; Rorty et al., 2000), *alienation and detachment between mother and daughter* (Cunha, Relvas, & Soares, 2009), *more impaired and less open mother-daughter communication* (Vidovic, Juresa, Begovac, Mahnik, & Tocilj, 2005), *high family conflict* (Sim et al., 2009; Wade et al., 2007), and *excessive parental control* (Ahmad, Waller, & Verduyen, 1994; Wonderlich, Ukestad, & Perzacki, 1994). This later variable has particular significance in that the symptoms of eating disorders may be an overt manifestation of a struggle for control between a child and parent.

Experts in adolescent health have developed a questionnaire measure of family communication with items such as “How often do your parents talk or share an activity with you at night?”, “How much do you feel you can tell your mother or father about your problems?”, and “When you do something wrong, does she or he talk with you and help you understand why it is wrong?” (Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Hannan, Beuhring, & Resnick, 2000). Results of the Neumark-Sztainer et al. investigation indicate that low levels of this sort of *family communication* are also associated with eating disorders in adolescents. Related findings show

that young women with eating disorders perceive their family as less capable of managing stressful events than comparison controls (Cunha et al., 2009). Collectively, this evidence points to difficulties associated with effective problem solving in families of girls with eating disorders.

The rather paradoxical nature of some of these family processes in eating disorders is nicely illustrated in a study of parenting conducted by Humphrey (1989). Specifically, Humphrey found that parents of anorexia patients were simultaneously more nurturing and comforting but also more ignoring and neglecting of their daughters in comparison to parents of healthy controls or bulimia patients. In contrast, the bulimia patients and their parents showed signs of hostile enmeshment. Humphrey argues that these mixed messages create ambivalence about separation for the anorectic daughter. Another somewhat paradoxical tendency among parents of eating disordered girls is the combination of excessive control, overprotectiveness, and intrusiveness coupled with minimal caring and affection (e.g., Palmer, Oppenheimer, & Marshall, 1988; Latzer et al., 2002; Rhodes & Kroger, 1992; Rorty et al., 2000). Because parental overprotectiveness tends to occur in a family environment that is otherwise high in conflict and criticism, there is little in the way of benefits from this behavior and it is therefore a robust risk factor for eating disorders (Wade et al., 2007). This is essentially the same affectionless control pattern that is also associated with depression.

Parent–Child Interactions

In chapter 2 we discussed social learning theory and its explanation for how children can learn behaviors by observing others perform the behaviors, along with their attendant consequences. Even a casual analysis of mother–daughter interactions in families where there is an eating disorder suggests that some daughters learn disordered eating behaviors from their mothers. For example, Hill, Weaver, and Blundell (1990) found a strong correlation between mothers' dietary restraint and that of their adolescent daughters. In another investigation, mothers' satisfaction with their body sizes was strongly correlated with that of their daughters (Evans & le Grange, 1995). It is no surprise that this particular sample of mothers had a history of eating disorders. In a very carefully controlled study, Stein et al. (1999) discovered that 26% of the mothers of young women with Bulimia Nervosa had a lifetime diagnosis of some form of eating disorder. This rate is significantly higher than mothers of women with no history of eating disorders (see also Moorehead et al., 2003). Of course family studies confound the effects of genes and environment, thus it is not entirely clear whether the association between maternal and child eating disorders is the result of genetic contributions from the mother, or the social environment that she also contributes to. Nevertheless, the data are at least consistent with a social learning effect for disordered eating.

Investigations of mothers' attitudes towards their daughters' body image arouse further suspicion about the role of some mothers in eating disorders. Mothers of eating disordered girls in one study thought that their daughters ought to lose significantly more weight than mothers of a group of non-eating disordered girls did (Pike & Rodin, 1991). These same mothers rated their daughters as significantly less attractive than the daughters rated themselves. This is astonishing given that most people with eating disorders have a negative body image and probably do not see themselves as very attractive. Related findings show that mothers of bulimics were more controlling and held higher expectations for their daughters than control mothers (Sights & Richards, 1984). It is not difficult to imagine the effect of a mother who feels that her daughter is unattractive, needs to lose weight, and who holds perhaps unrealistically high standards for her daughter. This sort of behavior can grossly deteriorate the self-esteem and self-image of a developing adolescent. When the critical messages of mothers couple with their own modeling of restrictive eating, the "solution" or prescribed course of action becomes obvious. The critical stance of some mothers toward their daughters may be part of a larger constellation of dissatisfaction and parenting problems.

For example, mothers of girls with eating disorders evidence diminished satisfaction and efficacy with their parental role (Sim et al., 2009). Fortunately some of the same modes of communication by which mothers convey dysfunctional views of dieting, body image, etc., such as modeling and direct verbal discussion, are also used by some mothers to teach their daughters healthy attitudes toward body and dieting (Ogle & Damhorst, 2003).

Research on parent-child interactions and eating disorders has focused almost exclusively on mothers. The few investigations that exist on father-daughter relationships show that fathers can also play a role in the experience of these disorders. When fathers encourage open communication without making strong demands for conformity or resolve conflicts in a collaborative and compromising style, their daughters are less likely to exhibit symptoms of eating disorders (Botta & Dumlao, 2002). Paternal invalidation is a particular problem for patients with bulimia nervosa, and actually predicts those patients who engage in self-induced vomiting (Haslam, Mountford, Meyer, & Waller, 2008). To the extent that fathers assume a collaborating and compromising style of family conflict resolution, their daughters are less likely to have symptoms of anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa (Botta & Dumlao, 2002).

Childhood Abuse and Eating Disorders

When family members abuse their own children they communicate a powerful message of devaluation and disrespect for appropriate boundaries (see chapter 16). These messages are conveyed clearly and dramatically through abusive behavior. In their study of female university students Messman-Moore and Garrigus (2007) found that approximately 54% of those students who had clinical bulimia had a history of child physical abuse in contrast to only 15% among those who did not have bulimia. In the same study, a history of child emotional abuse was evident in 37% of those with bulimia compared to 14% without the disorder.

Reports of childhood sexual abuse are relatively common in the research literature on family histories of people with eating disorders (e.g., Pike et al., 2007). The gross boundary violation that this behavior represents ought to be a clear signal that something is terribly wrong in the family system. This abuse often causes guilt, confusion, repulsion, and distrust of others. For many people, the escape from, or control of, these powerful feelings is sought in restrictive eating patterns or bingeing and purging.

There is some evidence to suggest that histories of sexual abuse are more common among those with eating disorders, especially bulimia, than what would be expected by chance alone (Smolak & Murnen, 2002). Some estimates indicate that rates of childhood sexual abuse run as high as 50–70% among eating disorder patients (Carter, Bewell, Blackmore, & Woodside, 2006; Oppenheimer, Howells, Palmer, & Chaloner, 1985). Another study of eating disorder patients found that 65% had experienced physical abuse and 28% had been sexually abused (Root & Fallon, 1988). However, other research suggests that the rate of sexual abuse among people with eating disorders does not differ from that of the general population (e.g., Connors & Morse, 1993; Lacey, 1990). What conclusion can be drawn from the literature on childhood sexual abuse and eating disorders? First, some of the variability in these prevalence estimates can be explained by different definitions of “sexual abuse” that different researchers employ. Second, sexual abuse appears to be more common when researchers study people seeking clinical treatment for eating disorders compared to people in the general population who have symptoms of eating disorders.

How does childhood abuse contribute to the development of eating disorders? Many feel that sexual abuse creates a vulnerability to the development of eating disorders (e.g., Connors & Morse, 1993; Vanderlinden & Vandereycken, 1996). For example, a theoretical model developed by Mallinckrodt, McCreary, and Robertson (1995) proposes that childhood sexual abuse, particularly incest, contributes to (and results from) dysfunctional family environments and attachments between the parent and child (see Figure 14.2). The combination

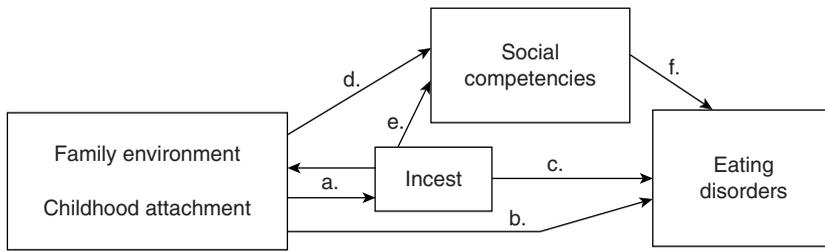


Figure 14.2 Mallinckrodt et al.'s theoretical model of dysfunctional family environments, sexual abuse, and eating disorders.

Note. From Mallinckrodt, B., McCreary, B.A., & Robertson, A.K. (1995). Co-occurrence of eating disorders and incest: The role of attachment, family environment, and social competencies. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 42*, 178–186. Published by the American Psychological Association. Reprinted with permission.

of these poor family environment variables and the sexual abuse is thought to inhibit the development of social competencies in the child. These authors define social competencies as a sense of self-efficacy, an ability to communicate emotional needs, an ability to experience intimacy, and the capacity to use relationships with other people to regulate negative emotions. It is the failure to develop these basic social competencies that links sexual abuse with eating disorders. The eating disorder becomes the means by which the child develops a sense of self-efficacy and affective regulation, albeit through dysfunctional non-interpersonal means. The results of Mallinckrodt et al.'s (1995) investigation provide compelling evidence for the validity of their model. For example, they observed an eating disorder rate of 39% among incest survivors, but only 17% among those with no childhood abuse. As an aside, the rate of eating disorders was 47% in their clinical sample of incest survivors, and 24% in the student sample of incest survivors, again suggesting higher rates of abuse in the background of clinical samples. Those incest survivors in this study who reported little emotional warmth and expressiveness from their mothers were most likely to have developed an eating disorder. Furthermore, incest survivors scored lower on a number of social competence indicators compared to those with no history of childhood sexual abuse. Perhaps the cornerstone hypothesis of Mallinckrodt et al.'s model is that incestuous family environments do not provide a context adequate for the development of social competencies and skills. This “social skills” deficit hypothesis is prevalent in the mental illness literature more generally. However this model is unique in postulating an origin of those social skills deficits, namely a dysfunctional family environment that includes sexual abuse.

Efforts to precisely understand how childhood sexual abuse factors into the development of eating disorders are hindered by the fact that such abuse is hopelessly confounded with dysfunctional family environments (Connors & Morse, 1993; Kinzl, Traweger, Guenther, & Biebl, 1994; Schmidt, Humfress, & Treasure, 1997). The family that either perpetrates or tolerates the sexual abuse of its children surely has other drastic problems. For example, physical and emotional abuse and neglect often occur in a family environment marked by very low cohesion (Mazzeo & Espelage, 2002). These other problems may be sufficient on their own to contribute to the development of eating disorders in the family's affected children. However, two vital studies on this issue showed that even after controlling for family psychosocial factors (e.g., family communication, parental monitoring, parental caring), youths who reported sexual abuse were still at significantly increased risk for disordered eating (Fonseca, Ireland, & Resnick, 2002; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2000). Incidentally, Fonseca and her associates found that positive communication functioned as a protective factor to decrease the likelihood of disordered eating and dieting. At this time childhood sexual abuse appears to be a risk factor for the later development of eating disorders. This relationship may be mediated by the poor social skills that result from a history of such abuse.

ALCOHOLISM

Definition

Substance use disorders are divided into two groups: substance dependence and substance abuse (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). *Substance dependence* involves a maladaptive pattern of substance use, associated with symptoms such as tolerance (the need for increased amounts to achieve the desired effect), withdrawal (physical and psychological distress associated with cessation), taking more of the substance than intended, disruption of social, occupational, or recreational activities as a result of the substance use, and continuation despite awareness of problems associated with the substance use (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). The primary feature of *substance abuse* is a maladaptive pattern of substance use that is associated with adverse effects. These adverse effects include for example, failure to fulfill important occupational, social, or domestic roles, using the substance in such a way as to create physical hazards or legal problems, and continued use of the substance despite interpersonal problems that are caused or exacerbated by its use (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Alcoholism is a specific class of the more general diagnosis of substance dependence. The term “alcoholism” is generally used to refer to *alcohol dependence* and/or *alcohol abuse*. Defining features of alcohol dependence are the same as substance dependence more generally. What distinguishes alcohol dependence from alcohol abuse is the presence of tolerance, withdrawal, and alcohol-related compulsive behavior in the person who is dependent on alcohol. Unfortunately some people use alcohol and/or other drugs to cope with the very problems that their heavy use creates. Like so many other psychological problems, alcoholism and substance abuse often affect and are affected by family interactions. In this section of the chapter we will focus our discussion on family interaction and alcoholism. However, in chapter 15 we will address the issue of adolescent substance abuse and family interaction. We reserve that discussion for chapter 15 because the sort of substance abuse that is often studied in adolescents might be more of a physical health risk than an indicator of a mental health problem.

Alcoholism and Family Interactions

Family systems theory has figured prominently in efforts to understand the role of family interactions in alcoholism (Steinglass, 1985). Recall from chapter 2 that family systems theory locates causes and consequents of problematic behavior in the larger family system in which it is embedded. In this case, a family systems theorist would ask how the family’s interactions contribute to or enable the problem drinking behavior, as well as how the problematic drinking affects the family’s interactions. Applying family systems concepts to alcoholism, Steinglass (1985) noted that some families organize their lives around alcohol, just as other families might organize their lives around children or work.

The effects of alcohol and alcoholism on family interaction are not entirely straightforward and certainly not uniformly negative. For example, in an early investigation of alcoholics and their family members (Steinglass, Weiner, & Mendelson, 1971), the expression of previously inhibited positive feelings between family members became especially pronounced during drinking periods. Apparently, when some alcoholics are drinking they become more friendly and outgoing toward their family members. Other research findings show that interactions of alcoholics and their families are actually more patterned, organized, and predictable while the alcoholic member is intoxicated (Steinglass, 1979, 1981; Steinglass & Robertson, 1983). This prompted Steinglass et al. (1971) to suggest that there is an “alcoholic system” in some families in which drinking is an integral part of the family system that actually maintains and stabilizes the family. After viewing and rating a videotape of their own interaction, even in the absence of actual drinking, mothers and adolescent children in alcoholic families rated family

members as less anxious and their interactions as more friendly than those of nonalcoholic families (Schweitzer, Wilks, & Callan, 1992). Findings such as these suggest that alcohol consumption can have paradoxically positive effects on some family interactions. However, as one might suppose, there is a little more to the story.

Even though there is clear evidence that alcohol consumption sometimes leads to positivity in alcoholics' family interactions, there are also negative effects on the family associated with drinking. For example, family scientist Theodore Jacob had families with an alcoholic father discuss items from various questionnaire inventories while drinking or not drinking (Jacob, Ritchey, Cvitkovic, & Blane, 1981). During their family discussions, the alcoholic families expressed more negative affect during the drink versus no drink conditions. The nature of nonalcoholics' family interactions was not affected by the drinking conditions. Parental alcoholism can also have adverse effects on parent-child interactions. For example, alcoholic parents appear less sensitive to their infants during free play sessions (Eiden, Chavez, & Leonard, 1999). Alcoholic fathers in the Eiden et al. study made fewer verbalizations, expressed more negative emotion, and were less responsive to their infants compared to nonalcoholic fathers. Eiden et al. (1999) discovered that many of these ill effects on parent-child interactions could be explained by the alcoholic parents' depression.

As research on family interactions and alcoholism became more fine grained, scientists began to realize that there were different types of problem drinking patterns that had different effects on family interactions. Jacob classified alcoholics according to whether they were *episodic* or *steady* drinkers (Jacob, Krahn, & Leonard, 1991). Episodic drinkers tend to alternate between periods of sobriety and binge drinking. During family interactions, episodic drinkers exhibited more negativity than steady drinkers. In addition, Jacob's research team found evidence of more positive behaviors from children and greater problem solving by both children and mothers in the family interactions of steady versus episodic drinkers. It appears then that the episodic pattern of problem drinking has the most deleterious effects on family communication patterns.

Alcoholism and Marital Interaction

Alcoholism has a powerful and unavoidable impact on marital communication and relationships. Alcoholics and their spouses clearly do not see eye to eye when it comes to family relations. In one study, alcoholics described themselves as more loving, affectionate, and understanding than nonalcoholics did (Neeliyara, Nagalakshmi, & Ray, 1989). However, their spouses sharply disagreed with the alcoholics' self-perceptions, perceiving them as less loving and more aggressive. In the areas of affective involvement (e.g., "we are too self-centered") and behavior control (e.g., "anything goes in our family") alcoholics and their spouses showed very low agreement (McKay, Maisto, Beattie, Longabaugh, & Noel, 1993). These differing perceptions hold considerable potential to produce marital distress.

It is sometimes the case that alcoholism is associated with a propensity for physical aggressiveness in males and in such cases marital interactions are particularly negative in tone (Murphy & O'Farrell, 1997). When discussing a marital problem, couples with an aggressive and alcoholic husband showed a higher rate of negative communication behaviors (e.g., blaming, criticizing, put-downs) and more negative reciprocity in their communication compared to couples with a non-aggressive alcoholic husband. It is often the case that verbal and physical aggressiveness go hand in hand in marriages with an alcoholic husband (Finger et al., 2010).

Negativity in marital interaction also seems to be prevalent when the wife is alcoholic. In a rare comparison of female and male alcoholics, couples with a female alcoholic were found to be more negative in their conversations than those with a male alcoholic or no alcoholic, so long as they were not drinking (Haber & Jacob, 1997). When they drank, differences from male-alcoholic couples disappeared. For concordant couples (both husband and

wife alcoholic), negativity in communication behaviors escalated when they were allowed to drink. This later finding suggests that at least one nonalcoholic spouse may be a prerequisite for adaptive outcomes associated with drinking. A related study showed greater negativity during a 10-minute conflict resolution discussion among maritally distressed couples in which the wife was alcoholic, compared to nondistressed, nonalcoholic couples (Kelly, Halford, & Young, 2002). Among these distressed couples with a female alcoholic, the men had high rates of negative encoding behaviors (e.g., criticize, offer negative solution), but not negative decoding behaviors (e.g., disagree, justify, withdraw). In contrast, their alcoholic wives had high rates of negative decoding behaviors but not encoding behaviors. Kelly and associates concluded that in married couples with a female alcoholic, the typical sex role pattern is reversed: It is the male who demands and the female who withdraws. This is a very understandable pattern of communication when the wife is alcoholic and her husband is not. With that said, there is at least some evidence that alcoholic wives express more positive communication with their husbands and alcoholic husbands express more negative communication with their wives relative to controls (Noel, McCrady, Stout, & Fisher-Nelson, 1991). Because alcoholic wives are very likely to be divorced or deserted by their partners (Corrigan, 1980), such couples who find their way into research studies with their marriages still intact may represent particularly well functioning alcoholic marriages. For this reason, the reality of typical wife–alcoholic marital interactions remains very difficult to document.

The influence of alcoholism on marital interaction can be affected by different patterns of problem drinking. For instance, *episodic* alcoholic husbands engage in less problem-solving and their wives exhibit more negativity than steady alcoholics (Jacob & Leonard, 1988). These group differences were only evident on occasions during which the alcoholic was drinking. Also, *steady drinking* alcoholics engaged in more problem solving communication on drink nights, indicating that alcohol may actually activate their conflict resolution skills. This could inadvertently reinforce the alcohol consumption. Another useful distinction in the alcoholism literature concerns the alcoholic's drinking pattern and location, being either *in-home* or *out-of-home*. Marital relations are most strained for the out-of-home drinkers. For out-of-home alcoholics, the husband's alcohol consumption is negatively associated with his wife's marital satisfaction (Dunn, Jacob, Hummon, & Seilhamer, 1987). Dunn et al. found that the alcohol consumption pattern of out-of-home drinkers was more variable and chaotic, whereas consumption for in-home drinkers was reinforced and associated with more positive outcomes. It is certainly possible that out-of-home drinkers are seeking an escape from what they perceive to be an already bad marriage. On the other hand, spouses of in-home drinkers may find the drinking behavior to be more predictable, less stressful, and associated with less suspicion about the drinker's behavior. A third approach to differentiating patterns of alcoholism distinguishes between *antisocial* and *non-antisocial alcoholism*. Antisocial alcoholics tend to exhibit earlier onset of drinking, more pervasive problems associated with drinking, and other psychological problems such as depression (e.g., Zucker, Ellis, Bingham, & Fitzgerald, 1996). Understandably, there is more hostile behavior (e.g., put-downs, blaming, cross-complaining) in couples with an antisocial alcoholic husband compared to those with a non-antisocial alcoholic husband (Floyd, Cranford, Daugherty, Fitzgerald, & Zucker, 2006). It is particularly interesting to note however that Foyd et al. found high rates of positive marital interaction behaviors (e.g., demonstrating empathy, agreement) when the alcoholic husband's wife was also alcoholic. This pattern is reminiscent of what some have characterized as a "drinking partnership" (Roberts & Leonard, 1998) where heavy drinking is something that can bring certain couples together, albeit in a somewhat dysfunctional context.

Earlier we mentioned that in certain instances, alcohol consumption can bring positivity or stabilization to family systems. This issue has also emerged in the research on alcoholism and marriage. There is at least limited evidence that alcohol can have an adaptive function in marital relationships by promoting the exchange of more positive and congenial behaviors between spouses (Marshall, 2003). However, these effects are almost always evident in the

context of light to moderate drinking patterns. Furthermore, the overwhelming pattern of research findings supports the contention that heavy alcohol use is maladaptive to marital functioning and that it is more often than not associated with negative marital interaction behaviors and marital violence (Marshall, 2003).

Finally, there is reason to believe that the spouses or partners of people with drug or alcohol dependence can inadvertently reinforce the behavior through well-intentioned attempts at caring for them (Le Poire, Erlandson, & Hallett, 1998; Le Poire, Hallett, & Erlandson, 2000). Le Poire's Inconsistent Nurturing as Control Theory explains how many spouses are torn between the competing goals of nurturing the addicted partner and controlling his or her substance abuse. Some fear that if they are completely successful at controlling their partner's substance abuse, they will no longer be needed in the relationship for the care that they can provide. Consequently many partners oscillate between caring for their intoxicated partner and attempting to control his or her behavior. Consistent verbal punishment of a partner's substance abuse is associated with lower relapse, whereas verbal reinforcement of the behavior (e.g., telling them they are more fun when drinking) is associated with higher relapse rates (Duggan, Dailey, & Le Poire, 2008). Nevertheless, many partners of substance abusers engage in intermittent reinforcement and punishment of the behavior. Unfortunately, this inconsistent punishment and reward pattern serves to only maintain the substance use.

Children of Alcoholics

Family scientists, therapists, and the lay public alike have expressed considerable interest in the children of alcoholics (COAs). COAs have received a great deal of research attention as an at-risk population (e.g., Sher, 1991; Windle & Searles, 1990). This stems from the belief that parental alcoholism leads to disrupted and dysfunctional family environments that have ill effects on children. These ill effects may be driven by parental modeling of dysfunctional and destructive behaviors, corruption and deterioration of parenting behaviors, or an amalgamation of both processes (Curran & Chassin, 1996; Jacob & Johnson, 1997). Given the negative effects of alcoholism on family interaction, it is understandable why children reared in such families might be at a disadvantage. However, there is still considerable debate and disagreement about the extent to which parental alcoholism has adverse effects on children.

There is certainly some solid evidence to show that COAs have more problems with alcohol and substance abuse, as well as a range of psychological problems, than non-COAs (Sher, Walitzer, Wood, & Brent, 1991). Even though genetic transmission might explain why COAs are at elevated risk for drug and alcohol problems, it is plausible to assume that social learning processes also contribute to the increased risk (see chapter 2). Children who observe parents using alcohol as a means of relaxation, coping with stress, celebration, etc. would naturally be expected to imitate this behavior that their parent(s) regularly modeled during the formative years. Related findings also indicate that COAs have more problems with their marriages and intimate relationships than non-COAs do (Domenico & Windle, 1993; Martin, 1995; Watt, 2002).

There is good reason to believe that many of the problems associated with being a child of an alcoholic parent are the result of ineffective parenting. Conflict often runs high in households with an alcoholic parent and COAs are particularly susceptible to the ill-effects of conflict with their parents (Barrera & Stice, 1998). Parental alcoholism appears to disrupt the family environment, especially by generating parental disregard for the child, and this can be damaging to children's sense of self-worth (Rangarajan & Kelly, 2006). It is also evident that alcoholic parents exhibit more verbal aggression, physical aggression, and antisocial behavior, and these family behaviors are in turn associated with greater expressions of negative affect, high power control, and overreactivity with children (Finger et al., 2010). Thus, the evidence shows that COAs are commonly exposed to what would have to be considered a "high risk" family environment and that would certainly have negative implications for their well-being.

It seems that for every study showing problems associated with being the child of an alcoholic there is another study showing that COAs are as functional and resilient as children of nonalcoholic parents. It may be reassuring to know that studies have found no differences between COAs and non-COAs in perceived social support (Wright & Heppner, 1991), anxiety (Clair & Genest, 1992; Velleman & Orford, 1993), social skills (Jacob & Leonard, 1986; Segrin & Menees, 1996), social maladjustment (Dinning & Berk, 1989), use of nonverbal communication behaviors (Senchak, Greene, Carroll, & Leonard, 1996), self-esteem (Menees, 1997), fear of intimacy (Giunta & Compas, 1994), or depression (Reich, Earls, Frankel, & Shayka, 1993). Such results should be harbingers of good news for the COA. Some alcoholic parents may raise children with psychosocial problems of their own, but this is not a foregone conclusion. Clinicians and family scientists are converging on the opinion that COAs are a complex and heterogeneous population who are not always distinguishable from those in the general population (Harrington & Metzler, 1997; Harter, 2000; Jacob & Johnson, 1997; West & Prinz, 1987).

Reasonable people could disagree on whether parental alcoholism has consistently negative effects on all children. However, it is more certain that children of alcoholics perceive their environments as distressed and dysfunctional. Compared to non-COAs, COAs describe their family of origin as more conflict laden (Garbarino & Strange, 1993; Giunta & Compas, 1994), less harmonious (Velleman & Orford, 1993), more troubled and stressed (Jones & Houts, 1992), and less cohesive (Dinning & Berk, 1989; Havey & Dodd, 1993). To a large extent, alcoholics and their spouses describe similar dynamics in the family environment (Moos & Moos, 1984). Even though COAs often describe a negative atmosphere in their families of origin, many are still indistinguishable from non-COAs on a variety of psychosocial outcomes. It seems that at least some COAs who grow up around dysfunctional family interaction are resilient, doing well in life despite their troubled upbringing.

West and Prinz (1987) noted that "Parental alcoholism does not occur in a vacuum. Other adverse familial and environmental factors can influence child outcomes to varying degrees" (p. 206). This highlights an interesting question: Are the problems that some COAs experience the result of parental alcoholism or some of the related family problems that go hand in hand with alcoholism? Children of alcoholics are between two and four times more likely than children of nonalcoholics to be exposed to parental divorce, separation, unemployment, or death, in addition to their parents' alcoholism (Menees & Segrin, 2000). COAs are also more likely to have experienced verbal, physical, and sexual abuse as children than non-COAs are (Bensley, Spieker, & McMahan, 1994; Johnson, 2002). Each of these stressors could independently have deleterious effects on the psychosocial adjustment of children. The Menees and Segrin (2000) study extensively controlled for comorbid stressors, finding that once taken into account, family environments of COAs are not described differently from those of children of nonstressed control families. Therefore, where COAs appear to be psychologically or socially disadvantaged, family stressors that go along with parental alcoholism may be as responsible, if not more so, than parental alcoholism per se (see also Heller, Sher, & Benson, 1982; Velleman, 1992).

CONCLUSION

There is an undeniable connection between abnormal and problematic family interaction patterns and family members' mental health. It is not always clear whether troubled family interaction patterns cause or are caused by mental health problems. From a systems perspective, these two questions represent a false dichotomy. Systems theorists feel that the interaction patterns and mental health problems maintain each other. There are certain family interaction motifs that appear to cut across various mental health problems. In the family of origin these include low cohesion, inappropriate adaptability, conflict, physical and sexual abuse, low social support, criticism, overinvolvement, and affectionless control. Affectionless control is

the combination of overprotectiveness/intrusiveness and low caring. This is an absolutely noxious combination of parenting behaviors that is remarkably capable of damaging children's mental health. In the family of orientation, problems such as marital distress, negativity, arguing, and failure to reach agreements go hand in hand with mental health problems. There are some unique family interaction patterns that play an important role in schizophrenia. These include communication deviance, a negative family affective style, and expressed emotion. Family processes that have been implicated in various mental health problems are summarized in Table 14.3. What is not clear at this juncture is why, for example, one child reared in an

Table 14.3 Summary of family processes implicated in mental health problems

| <i>Mental Health Problem</i> | <i>Family of Origin Processes</i> | <i>Family of Orientation Processes</i> |
|------------------------------|--|---|
| Depression | Affectionless control Family conflict Extreme cohesion (high or low) Low support, acceptance, confirmation Child maltreatment | Negative communication from depressed parents Positivity suppression from depressed parents Child rejection of depressed parents Marital distress Negative marital interactions Marital conflict Demand/withdrawal marital interactions Self-silencing Hasty mate-selection |
| Loneliness | Low family social support Low family cohesion Excessively close relationships with parents Family conflict | Low provision of social support Low marital cohesion Marital conflict Low social support from spouse |
| Schizophrenia | Communication deviance Expressed emotion Negative affective style | |
| Eating disorders | Low family cohesion Extreme family adaptability (high or low) Expressed emotion Inappropriate parental pressure Stressful mealtime or food-related communication Poor family problem solving Low parental care Intrusive parenting and excessive parental control Problematic mother–daughter relationships Negative/critical evaluations from mother Paternal demands for conformity Paternal invalidation Child maltreatment | |
| Alcoholism | | Positive communication with alcohol consumption Negative affect expression Low responsiveness to child Physical aggression Negative marital interactions Demand/withdrawal conflict interactions Oscillating patterns of spousal punishment and reward Children with psychosocial problems |

environment of low cohesion might later become depressed while another might develop an eating disorder (and still another might not develop any mental health problem). However one thing is clear: Dysfunctional family communication patterns can mix up, distort, and confuse people's thoughts and emotions, particularly when they are experienced during the formative years of life. It is for this reason that the blueprints for psychological well-being or distress are drawn to a large extent through interactions in the family or origin.

15 Family Interaction and Physical Health

When most people think of factors that promote or harm health, usually things like diet, exercise, and other lifestyle factors come to mind. If family is thought of in this context, it is ordinarily in terms of genetic influences on health. However, marital and family interactions contribute to the development and course of many physical health issues. This is a very fascinating time in family science, as some communication variables have even been elevated to a causal level in the path to physiological responses and health problems. In turn, physical health issues shape the nature of many family interactions. In this chapter, we explore how marital/family interaction relates to spouses' physical health, children's illnesses, adolescents' substance use and abuse, and adolescents' and young adults' sexual health. We also explore some of the major communication processes that families negotiate as they respond to physical health issues. These processes include caregiving/social support and privacy management. It is safe to say that at some point in time, the communication in every family changes in response to physical health issues or has an effect on the course of physical health problems. We are just beginning to understand the complex ways family interaction and physical health interact.

MARITAL INTERACTION AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

A great deal of the research on marriage and physical health has focused on the way three relationship variables relate to illness, disease, and mortality. These three variables are *relationship status*, *relationship quality*, and *relationship behaviors/interactions* (Burman & Margolin, 1992; Schmaling & Sher, 1997). Indeed, most early research looked only at the link between *relationship status* (i.e. married, single, divorced, etc.) and health. This line of research proved useful at least for making people aware that marriage and health mutually influence each other, without necessarily answering how or in what way they do so. In 1979, Lois Verbrugge was one of the first researchers to establish a link between marriage and health. Using comprehensive data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Center for Health Statistics, Verbrugge found that divorced and separated people were the least healthy, with widowed, single, and married persons respectively being more healthy. Divorced persons have the highest rates of chronic conditions, suffer the most partial work disability, visit physicians more times per year, have the highest hospitalization rates, and have the longest hospital stays. Compared to married individuals, separated and divorced persons also have poorer immune functioning, and those who have most recently experienced separation have the worst immune functioning (Kennedy, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988). Numerous other studies indicate that marital status is related to mortality, such that married persons have a lower risk of mortality (Burman & Margolin, 1989, 1992; Liu, 2009). There appear to be some sex differences in the relationship between marriage and mortality. Unmarried men have a 250% greater risk for mortality than

married men, whereas unmarried women have a 50% greater risk for mortality than their married counterparts (Ross, Mirowsky, & Goldsteen, 1990).

Before concluding that people should get married in an effort to better their health, it is important to understand that the relationship between marriage and health is far more complex than it may appear at first glance. Several popular explanations for why married persons are healthier argue that it is not marriage per se that enhances one's health status, but rather the type of people who tend to marry and the protections that are offered by some marriages. Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton (2001) summarize two hypotheses for the differences in health status of married versus nonmarried persons. The *selection hypothesis* suggests that healthier people are more likely to marry and stay married, compared to unhealthy individuals. People who are seriously ill have a more difficult time dating and finding mates, which means that people who marry are in a sense "selected" for good health (Verbrugge, 1979). Later in this chapter we also discuss the strain that major health problems place on spouses and marital interaction. In some cases, ill people find it more difficult to maintain their marriages. The *protection hypothesis* suggests that people receive protections that buffer ill health. Two primary protections include the following: (1) Married persons tend to live a less risky lifestyle compared to single persons, and (2) Married persons benefit from companionship, social support, and instrumental services from their spouses. Inherent in the later protection is the assumption that not just any marriage, but only high quality marriages marked by positive interactions benefit one's health.

Another issue that complicates the marriage-longevity effect is that dysfunctional patterns of interaction with spouses can damage health. Researchers very quickly surmised that *relationship status* does not predict physical health as well as overall *relationship quality* and specific *relationship behaviors/interactions*. This is vividly illustrated in a study that followed over 3000 adults for 10 years, assessing their marital quality and mortality (Eaker, Sullivan, Kelly-Hayes, D'Agostino, & Benjamin, 2007). Eaker and her colleagues found, as predicted, that married men (but not women) were half as likely to die during the 10-year period of the investigation compared to unmarried men. More pertinent to the issue at hand, the quality of the marriage seemed to have a more powerful effect on health and mortality than marital status per se. Specifically, women who "self-silenced" during conflict—that is, they usually or always kept their feeling to themselves—were four times more likely to die than women who expressed their feelings during conflict. Men who reported that their wives' work disrupted their home life because she was often upset by her work were almost three times more likely to develop coronary heart disease over the course of the study than men who did not report such disruptions (Eaker et al., 2007). The harmful effects of self-silencing can be especially problematic when both spouses suppress their feelings during conflict. Spouses in such couples have about three times the mortality rate as couples where one or both members are willing to openly express their anger during conflicts (Harburg, Kaciroti, Gleiberman, Julius, & Schork, 2008).

In the following sections we explain in more detail what is currently known about some of the mechanisms that could explain the association between marriage, health, and mortality. We explore the protection hypothesis by examining how married people live less risky lifestyles and how the quality of relationship interactions is related to physical health. We then examine the impact that major health problems of one spouse have on marital interactions and the health and well-being of the other spouse.

Marriage and Lifestyle

Social control theory proposes that social ties regulate behavior such that socially integrated persons engage in fewer risky or deviant behaviors compared to socially isolated persons (Tucker & Anders, 2001, p. 468). People with social ties tend to have more regular eating and sleeping habits and they smoke and drink less (Wallston, Alganias, Devellis, & Devellis, 1983). In a sense, social ties offer up other people and relationships to be accountable to. It is not

uncommon for spouses to remind each other to do things to protect their health (e.g., to visit the doctor, to take their medication, to abstain from smoking or too much drinking, to drive safely) (Cohen & Lichtenstein, 1990; Tucker & Anders, 2001; Verbrugge, 1979). Tucker and Anders (2001) found that when given a list of common health behaviors, most spouses can point to a few that they would like their spouses to change. The 63 husbands and 63 wives in their study most commonly reported that they wanted their spouses to exercise more frequently and eat healthier food.

Tucker and Anders (2001) also asked the spouses whether and how they persuade their partner to change their behavior. They found that the way spouses attempted social control made a big difference in the partners' responses. One dilemma spouses face is the possibility that their social control attempts could cause the partner to become irritated, feel guilty, or resent the control attempts. Tucker and Anders concluded that these negative outcomes may occur when spouses use negative social control strategies, such as nagging or placing restrictions on the partners' behaviors. When spouses use social control attempts such as joining in healthy behaviors with the partner or helping the partner think of healthy substitutes for unhealthy behavior, then the control attempts are likely more effective because the partners' perceive that the spouses are genuinely interested in their well-being.

Although married persons tend to have a healthier lifestyle than single persons, this is not universally the case. Spouses in some marriages jointly encourage unhealthy lifestyle habits (e.g., overeating, inactivity, excessive work, or dangerous leisure habits). It is also possible that negative marital interactions can lead spouses to a risky lifestyle. There is evidence to indicate that alcohol and drug abuse not only cause marital conflict, but they are a result of marital conflict (O'Farrell, Hooley, Fals-Stewart, & Cutter, 1998). The important point is that positive and negative marital quality each lead to very different lifestyles. Being in a *good* marriage promotes healthier lifestyle behaviors. In particular, positive interactions between spouses are related to fewer harmful behaviors such as risky eating habits, substance use, and inadequate sleep (Wickrama, Conger, & Lorenz, 1995). Overall, spouses directly influence each other's lifestyle, in part because they share health-related behaviors such as eating, sleeping, and leisure habits (Wickrama et al., 1995, p. 100). The quality of spouses' interaction appears to influence the positive or negative direction of these habits.

Physiological Responses to Marital Interaction

In addition to altering health habits, marital interactions elicit physiological responses that potentially contribute to the development and course of some physical health problems. To demonstrate a causal relationship between marital interaction and physical health, Burman and Margolin (1989) explain that one must first establish that marital interaction is related to physiological functioning, and then demonstrate that the physiological changes caused health problems. This requires studying couples prior to the development of health problems or even prior to the physiological responses that potentially cause the health problems. Toward this end, researchers have successfully demonstrated that specific behaviors during marital interaction alter a number of physiological responses such as stress hormones, heart rate, blood pressure, and immune functioning.

In an impressive program of research, Janice Kiecolt-Glaser and her associates have documented how marital quality and conflict interactions affect physiological responses. Their research methods typically involve bringing couples to the laboratory, seating the spouses face-to-face, and asking them to spend 30 minutes or so discussing and trying to resolve two or three marital issues that the researchers judge to be the most conflict-producing based on earlier reports from the couple. The most unique part of their research methods involves inserting a heparin well in each spouse's arm so that blood samples can be periodically drawn before, during, and after the problem solving discussion. Drawing multiple samples allows the

researchers to compare how physiology during and after the conflict interaction compares to baseline physiology before the conflict interaction. The blood samples allow researchers to test the body's stress hormones and immune functioning. When the body produces elevated stress hormones, for example, high levels of epinephrine (i.e., adrenaline) or high levels of adrenocorticotrophic hormone (ACTH; i.e., a hormone the body secretes in response to stress), researchers know the body is experiencing stress. The experience of stress then mediates immune functioning, such that the greater the stress, the poorer the immune system functions. Researchers measure immune functioning by testing blood samples in the lab for the presence of white blood cells or by testing how cells respond to the introduction of foreign substances such as viruses or bacteria. The researchers also monitor heart rate and blood pressure before, during, and after the interactions. These data provide information on spouses' cardiovascular reaction to conflict. Several other researchers we refer to in this chapter use methods similar to these popularized by Kiecolt-Glaser.

Overall, research indicates that couples who are more hostile, negative, and controlling during problem solving discussions experience increased stress hormones (Malarkey, Kiecolt-Glaser, Pearl, & Glaser, 1994) and negative changes in their immune functioning (Kiecolt-Glaser et al. 1993). The stress takes a toll on immune functioning in part because chronic stress disrupts circadian rhythms, which are related to immune functioning (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). These couples also have higher increases in blood pressure and their blood pressure remains elevated for a longer time after the interaction (Brown & Smith, 1992). The heightened blood pressure is a reaction to the stress induced by negative affect. Blood pressure increases whether anger is actively expressed or passively suppressed (e.g., withdrawing gaze, hanging head, rolling eyes) (Morell & Apple, 1990, p. 399). Some couple types are especially prone to negative physiological responses to conflict. These "at-risk" couples occur when both spouses exhibit high dominance and high negative affect (Thomsen & Gilbert, 1998) or, similarly, when Type A personality husbands who are dominant, anxious, hostile competitors match with highly educated women who compete for dominance (Frankish & Linden, 1996).

Marital interaction appears to affect physiology throughout the course of a marriage. Kiecolt-Glaser et al. (1997) found that even long-term married couples have negative immune responses to negative marital interaction. In a striking study, Kiecolt-Glaser, Bane, Glaser, and Malarkey (2003) followed 90 couples over the course of their first 10 years of marriage and studied how their stress hormone levels in their first year of marriage related to and predicted marital outcomes. Compared to intact couples, couples that divorced over the course of the study had 34% higher epinephrine levels during a conflict discussion in their first year of marriage. Their stress hormones were also significantly higher throughout the day and at night in their first year of marriage. Kiecolt-Glaser et al. then looked closer at the couples who were still married 10 years later, but compared those who were in distressed marriages versus those who were still happy. Among women whose marriages were distressed, ACTH levels during the conflict discussion in the first year were twice as high versus those whose marriages were not troubled 10 years later. As one might expect given the high stress hormones, couples who were married but distressed 10 years later showed higher rates of negative behaviors during the Time 1 conflict interaction. Kiecolt-Glaser (2003) conclude that "stress hormones may function as a kind of bellwether in early marriage, reflecting emotional responses that individuals, particularly women, have not yet acknowledged consciously" (p. 187). In other words, heightened stress hormones foreshadow negative relationship changes that the spouses themselves do not even foresee at the moment.

One particularly noxious pairing of husbands and wives occurs when the wife is critical and the husband is verbally inhibited. These have been characterized as "precarious couples" because they are notorious for unsuccessfully managing stress. Consistent with this hypothesis, after experiencing a stressor, men in such couples showed a higher heart rate than men who were not in precarious relationships (Swann, McClarty, & Rentfrow, 2007). One has to think

of men in such relationships as being at high risk for health problems because evidently just interacting with their spouse can be a source of increased stress.

Do positive behaviors enhance physiology to the degree that negative behaviors damage it? There is some evidence that people with a higher level of perceived family/spousal support experience more cardiovascular benefits in the form of higher vascular resistance indexes (Broadwell & Light, 1999). Further, men who perceive more support have lower blood pressure compared to men who perceive low support. Newlywed wives who are more satisfied with the support they receive from their husbands have attenuated cortisol responses and lower blood pressure (i.e., an indicator of less stress) in conflict interactions compared to those who are less satisfied with the support they are receiving from their spouse (Heffner, Kiecolt-Glaser, Loving, Glaser, & Malarkey, 2004). However, a great deal of research argues that supportive or neutral behaviors do not have much effect on physiology, or at least they do not positively alter physiology to the degree that negative or hostile behaviors negatively alter physiology (Jones, Beach, & Jackson, 2004; Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1993; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Morell & Apple, 1990). As Ewart, Taylor, Kraemer, and Agras (1991) state, “it is not how ‘nice’ spouses are to each other—but how ‘nasty’ they are not” that matters most when it comes to physical health (p. 161).

Physiological Responses of Men Versus Women

Another fascinating and somewhat controversial topic is whether and how men and women have different physiological responses to marital conflict. Most people agree that there are gender differences in responses to conflict. A few researchers (e.g., Gottman, Coan, Carrère, & Swanson, 1998; Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1994) make the case that men experience more negative physiological responses to marital conflict. They argue that the reason men are more likely to withdraw from conflict is because their physiological response to negative conflict interactions is so intense that they need to “escape” the situation, or else explode. They also suggest that the husbands’ or wives’ ability to “soothe” husbands’ negative physiological responses to conflict is key to successful marriages.

The above explanation is appealing, except for the fact that a great deal of other evidence suggests just the opposite. Women experience more negative physiological changes as a result of negative conflict interactions than do men (Jones et al., 2004; Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2003; Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1996; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1993; Morell & Apple, 1990). During and after conflict, women’s stress hormones and blood pressure are higher and their immune functioning is lower in comparison to men. Some even speculate that conflict does not trigger lingering negative health outcomes for men to the extent that it does for women, perhaps in part because some men tend to effectively withdraw from conflict before they suffer too much physiologically (Jones, Beach, & Jackson, 2004). Husbands’ withdrawal, however, is linked to higher stress hormones in wives (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1996). The infamous wife demand/husband withdrawal conflict pattern has been linked with increased cortisol responses in wives, suggesting greater stress, but not in husbands (Heffner et al., 2006). Increases in blood pressure that are ordinarily experienced during marital conflicts are significantly associated with wives’ but not husbands’ judgments of how bad their marriage is (Menchaca & Dehle, 2005). Such findings combine to indicate that marital conflict may take a greater toll on wives’ physiology than husbands’.

Physiological Responses to Marital Interaction and Health Problems

In many cases, it is difficult to establish a causal link between the development or worsening of health problems and physiological responses to marital interaction. Yet, researchers have made some successful efforts toward this end. Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton (2001) explain that the

combination of increased stress and lower immune functioning leads to slower wound healing. Whether the stress is induced by negative marital interaction or something more external to the relationship, such as academic exams, stress in general slows the healing process. Graham et al. (2009) brought married couples to a hospital lab for 24-hour visits during which they inflicted blister wounds on their arms. Shortly thereafter the couples had a discussion about an area of conflict in their relationship. Most participants in the Graham et al. study evidenced increased levels of proinflammatory cytokines, as would be expected for people undergoing stressful procedures. However, the level of these cytokines was higher among those who engaged in hostile behavior during the conflict interaction and lower among those who used a lot of words suggestive of cognitive processing (e.g., “because,” “think,” “ought”) during the conflict. The Graham et al. study suggests that extensive cognitive processing during conflict and minimization of hostility can literally have anti-inflammatory effects on the body. Several other studies have implicated stress from marital interaction in the development and course of arthritis, cardiovascular disease, and ulcers (Burman & Margolin, 1989; see Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). Heightened blood pressure and heart rates are particular risk factors in the course of hypertension and cardiovascular disease. After controlling for the effects of work stress, education, and income, overall marital quality is still significantly related to physical illness, with satisfied spouses less likely to become ill (Wickrama, Lorenz, Conger, & Elder, 1997). A summary of the psychophysiological processes that have been implicated in marital interactions and health appear in Figure 15.1.

Marriage and Major Health Problems

Just as marital interaction can influence health problems, major health problems in one spouse may also have an effect on marital interaction and the health status of the other spouse. Roy (1985) asserts that “illnesses in families come in clusters,” and illness in one member of the family often causes other members to develop related health problems (p. 204). Some of the problems that spouses of ill partners develop are associated with stress involved in the caregiver role. Spouses offering significant care to their partners often compromise their own physical health, in the form of poorer immune functioning, as well as their own mental health (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1987; Thompson & Pitts, 1992). We discuss this more toward the end of the chapter. Some spouses of chronic pain sufferers even report experiencing occasional pain symptoms along with their spouse, though this phenomenon is poorly understood (Roy, 1985).

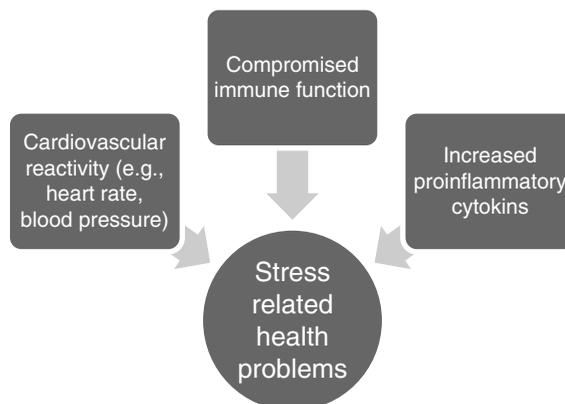


Figure 15.1 Psychophysiological processes implicated in negative marital interactions and health.

Illness in one spouse also affects general marital interaction. Indeed, any change in the marital system has the potential to negatively or positively alter interaction patterns. Change that stems from meeting the demands and challenges of the illness is no exception (Cannon & Cavanaugh, 1998). Much of the change that takes a negative toll on marital interaction centers around the increasing demands placed on the non-ill spouse. In some situations, the non-ill spouse takes over chores and roles that were once undertaken by the other spouse. This leaves the non-ill spouse with fewer opportunities for leisure and satisfying interactions outside the family. At the same time, the ill spouse, who likely is limited to fewer interactions outside the family, relies on the non-ill spouse more than ever. As a result, inequities between the spouses become exacerbated (Thompson & Pitts, 1992). The type of marital interaction and the topics of marital interaction may also be dominated by the illness or chronic pain.

In most cases, it is crucial for spouses to respond with support and acknowledgement of their partners' pain during discussions of the illness. There may be some rare exceptions in the case of chronic pain conditions. Turk, Kerns, and Rosenberg (1992) found evidence that in some cases, the positive attention spouses offer to their partners' overt expressions of pain may actually maintain or increase the expressions of pain and even increase the potential for perceived disability. By means of operant conditioning, the pain expressions are essentially positively reinforced or rewarded by the spouse. Turk et al. found that "selectively avoiding provision of attention for expression of pain while remaining globally positive appears to be associated with a decreased experience of pain and depression" (p. 268). Note that the spouses were not getting irritated with their partners' pain expressions or making negative remarks in response to their pain expressions (i.e., they were not saying "Oh, it doesn't hurt that bad"). Rather, they were maintaining a positive demeanor without giving extra attention to the pain.

Interestingly, there is some evidence to indicate that a spouse's illness may not be so damaging to marital interaction, and in some cases, the spouses may actually enhance their interaction in response to the illness. Burman and Margolin claim, "As obvious as it seems that health problems would affect marriages, the data in this area are not nearly as powerful" as one might expect (1992, p. 58). In other words, there is not consistent evidence that marital status or marital quality changes greatly after the onset of health problems. This could be attributed to differences in the course of various illnesses and differences in how individuals cope with illnesses. Recall that the models of family stress presented in chapter 10 explain how two families may react very differently to the same stressor depending on their coping skills and perception of the stressor. In addition, some couples experience temporary difficulties in their marriage that dissipate once they are able to adjust to the consequences of the illness or disease. Thompson and Pitts (1992) also propose that when couples face the illness of one spouse, a good marriage may get better, but a bad marriage may get worse. This reflects the idea that "pre-illness" marital functioning sets the stage for how a couple will react to the stressor. Badger (1992), for example, found that husbands' experience with cardiovascular disease exacerbated existing marital distress that was already present (see also van der Poel & Greeff, 2003).

In recent years there has been a lot of attention focused on how marriages and families are affected by cancer diagnosis and treatment. Cancer is a potentially life threatening disease that can have prolonged and sometimes grueling treatments. Understandably many people with this disease experience significant psychological distress. However, if spouses and family members provide social support and constructive communication with the cancer patients, psychological distress can be significantly reduced (Manne & Badr, 2010). In contrast, when family members actively avoid talking about cancer, the cancer survivor's psychological well-being appears to be negatively influenced (Mallinger, Griggs, & Shields, 2006). Maintaining effective problem solving communication between parents and children has also proven to be beneficial to parents' mental health when dealing with cancer (Gazendam-Donofrio et al., 2009).

Quality family relationships not only benefit the psychological well-being of the cancer patient, but they literally appear to enhance survival. Breast cancer patients who report that they have a spouse to whom they can turn to in order to talk about a serious problem or situation have about one third the relative risk of mortality over an 8-year period as those who do not have a confiding spouse (Weihs, Enright, & Simmens, 2008; see Coyne et al., 2001 for comparable findings among congestive heart failure patients).

One problem that can occur when a family member has cancer is finding the right level of support and care to provide. Sometimes a family member will do something like preparing a meal for the cancer patient thinking that this is a supportive and helpful act, when the cancer patient might not see it as supportive (e.g., “why are you treating me like a child?”). For married couples, one of the keys to maintaining a satisfying relationship during such stressful times is having agreement on what exactly constitutes supportive behaviors (Norton & Manne, 2007). In other words, it helps when both the husband and wife are on the same page when it comes to knowing what the cancer patient wants and does not want from his or her partner.

The profound psychological distress experienced by people who have cancer also appears to extend to family members as well (Segrin & Badger, 2010, 2011). Dealing with and managing uncertainty becomes a major focus of family interaction when a member has cancer (Beach & Good, 2004). Just as with cancer patients themselves, maintaining a quality relationship is also beneficial to the mental health of cancer patients’ spouses (Segrin, Badger, Meek, & Bonham, 2006). It is interesting to note that the psychological well-being of cancer patients and family members tends to fluctuate together (Northouse et al., 2007; Segrin, Badger, Dorros, Meek, & Lopez, 2007; Segrin, Badger, Meek, Lopez, Bonham, & Sieger, 2005). This effect illustrates the family systems concepts of interdependence and mutual influence that were discussed in chapter 2. Evidently, as cancer patients and their family members interact over the course of diagnosis and treatment, the psychological well-being of one family member influences that of the others.

Before leaving the topic of health and family systems, it is worth noting that some people report positive family outcomes associated with major illnesses such as cancer (e.g., Rinaldis, Paken-Ham, & Lynch, 2010; Wong, Cavanaugh, MacLeamy, Sojourner-Nelson, & Koopman, 2009). Sometimes family members are brought closer together, find new meaning in life, and experience enhanced self-esteem from caring for their ill relatives. Recall our discussion in chapter 10 of the Double ABC-X model of family stress. This model proposes that some couples/families experience *bonadaptation*, such that they actually function better after the experience of the stressor than they did before.

Summary

There is general support for the idea that married individuals are healthier than single, widowed, or divorced individuals. Aside from the fact that healthier individuals are more likely to get married than unhealthy individuals, marriage offers two primary protections. Married individuals often lead less risky lifestyles, and married people benefit from the support and companionship of their spouses. The catch is that marital quality has a stronger relationship with physical health than simply being married. Some marriages that are marked by negative, hostile interactions are damaging to one’s health. Such marriages trigger increases in stress hormones, heart rate, and blood pressure that lead to decreases in immune functioning. Naturally, the negative physiological responses are risk factors for a variety of illnesses and diseases. Finally, major health problems also influence marital interaction, and in some cases are also influenced by marital interaction. There is even some evidence to show that people with major illnesses live longer if they have a close and confiding relationship with their spouse.

FAMILY INTERACTION AND CHILD HEALTH**Major Childhood Illness and the Family System**

People tend to associate the experience of major health problems with older age. Nevertheless, it is sometimes the case that young children experience chronic and serious health problems. These create a serious stress not just for the child, but for the greater family as well. When children experience major and/or chronic illness, the nature of family life is dramatically altered. Parents and siblings have to assume greater responsibility in a caregiving role, leisure activities are often restricted, and the welfare of the sick child can become a dominant theme of family interactions. Even though these family adjustments are often a necessary family response to the stress of childhood illness, they come with serious repercussions. The care of a sick child often means that the needs of other children in the family do not get as much attention as they would otherwise. The opportunities for a husband and wife to spend leisure time by themselves may be entirely eliminated. Likewise, their opportunity to attend to the maintenance of their marriage may be greatly reduced, as their interactions may be centered largely on the care and welfare of their sick child. Sometimes parents even experience anger and resentment toward the sick child (Peri, Molinari, & Taverna, 1991). Understandably, both psychological distress and family conflict tend to be higher in those families with a seriously ill child compared to families with healthy children (e.g., Pai et al., 2007).

Family Interaction and Chronic Childhood Illness: The Example of Diabetes

Childhood diabetes is a chronic health condition that demands major attention from, and reorganization of, the family. The effective management of diabetes involves careful attention to diet and exercise, monitoring of blood glucose levels, and daily injections of insulin. These are sufficiently challenging for even an adult to keep up with. When a young child has diabetes, the majority of these burdens fall on the shoulders of family members. Although some people think of diabetes as a “purely medical” condition, it can be affected by family interaction patterns. For example, high levels of family conflict are negatively associated with effective control of childhood diabetes (Anderson, Miller, Auslander, & Santiago, 1981). Part of this effect is due to family conflict interfering with treatment adherence. Wysocki (1993) studied a sample of 11 to 18 year old adolescents who had diabetes and found that problems in family interaction structures (e.g., triangulation, coalitions) were negatively associated with the adolescents’ glycohemoglobin levels, measured through blood tests. Because lower glycohemoglobin levels indicate better management of diabetes, it is obvious that dysfunctional family interaction patterns are associated with more difficulty with managing the illness.

It is common to see difficulties in the functioning and communication behavior of families where a child has diabetes. Such families exhibit poorer functioning in the areas of clear and direct communication, appropriate expression of emotion, and flexibility of family roles (Piazza-Waggoner et al., 2008). During laboratory problem solving interactions, families with a diabetic child have been observed to talk less, ask fewer questions, and make fewer commands (Carlson, Gesten, McIver, DeClue, & Malone, 1994). Carlson and her coworkers conjecture that diabetic families may be more superficial in their family problem solving efforts. Nevertheless, it is clear that families are taxed by the demands of managing their child’s diabetes. When families were asked to role play a diabetes problem solving task (e.g., what type of food to eat or avoid) diabetes families rated the task as more difficult than control families did (Carlson et al., 1994).

Perhaps the key element in the family’s ability to effectively manage their child’s diabetes is keeping an upbeat attitude and avoiding conflict and tension. Blechman and Delamater (1993) developed a competency model of family functioning based on their work with diabetes families. Their model begins with the assumption that a *good mood* helps to make people prepared

and open to learning and optimal performance. Second, *effective family communication* promotes good moods in family members. They conceptualize effective family communication as the exchange of information, behavior management, and demonstration of good problem-solving skills. Theoretically, all of these are signs of good communication and should function to help the family maintain an upbeat outlook on their situation. Finally, positive moods promote *physiological fitness*. This is a point that has been vividly established earlier in this chapter in our discussion of marital quality and physiological outcomes. Blechman and Delamater (1993) illustrated how there are convincing research findings to establish the links between family communication and family members' moods, and positive moods and better diabetic control. The families who do the best job in managing their child's diabetes are those that have open communication, minimal conflict, good cohesion, and a generally friendly atmosphere, despite the obvious stress and burden that they must bear.

Family Conflict and Poor Child Health Outcomes

There are few family interaction processes that appear to be as detrimental to children's health as family conflict. Family conflict is positively associated with children's physical symptoms such as headaches and stomach aches (Mechanic & Hansell, 1989). In Mechanic and Hansell's investigation, the children of divorced parents rated family conflict as significantly more unpleasant than their parents' actual divorce. In fact, the adolescents from high conflict-intact families had more physical ailments than those from low conflict-divorced families. Among already ill children, family conflict is associated with poor child adjustment to the illness (Drotar, 1997). What is even more remarkable is the long term impact of family conflict on health problems. Lundberg (1993) analyzed longitudinal data on family living conditions and health for over 4000 people in Sweden. He examined the effect of economic hardship, growing up in a large family (i.e., four or more siblings), parental divorce, and family conflict. Of these four stressful family processes, family conflict had the most powerful effect on subsequent physical illnesses. Children who grew up in a family marked by high levels of conflict were in a worse state of health 13 years later. Furthermore, family conflict during childhood was associated with a 46% increased risk of mortality among the elderly participants (i.e., ages of 81–84) in this study.

What does family conflict do to children's health and how does it make them susceptible to later health problems? Just like a bad marriage leads to physiological disturbances, family conflict upsets children's normal physiology. In a unique experimental study, children were exposed to angry or friendly interactions between two adult research assistants who, unbeknownst to the children, were just role playing these emotional reactions (El-Sheikh, Cummings, & Goetsch, 1989). Children in the angry interaction condition showed more behavioral signs of distress and had higher blood pressure than those who were exposed to the friendly exchange. In a related investigation, boys who came from families that were low in supportiveness and positive involvement with the child showed more anger and hostility, and had greater cardiovascular arousal in response to simple laboratory stressors such as an isometric handgrip exercise or counting backwards by sevens (Woodall & Matthews, 1989).

The increased sympathetic arousal evidenced by children exposed to unsupportive and conflicted family interactions is functional in the short run for activating resources to deal with the stressor. The problem, however, is when this heightened responsiveness of the nervous system becomes permanently altered. This is a process known as *allostasis* or *allostatic load*, and family scientists believe that chronic exposure to stressful family environments is responsible for increased allostatic load in children, making them vulnerable to subsequent health problems (Jones et al., 2004). The wearing down of the nervous system associated with *allostasis* is exceptionally taxing on children's physiology and this can culminate in illness through compromised immune response or dysfunction in the same physiological systems that are affected by the sympathetic arousal (e.g., heart, gastro-intestinal system, etc.).

Theoretical Models of Childhood Illness and Family Functioning

Historically, it has been assumed that childhood illness is a stressor that just “happens” to the family (Griffin, Parrella, Krainz, & Northey, 2002). However, researchers are beginning to understand that for at least some childhood illnesses such as asthma, diabetes, and ulcerative colitis, for example, the family can actually influence the course of the disorder. In other words there is a reciprocal relationship between the child’s illness and the nature of his or her family environment (e.g., Wamboldt & Wamboldt, 2000). In the 1970s, Minuchin and his associates proposed the “Psychosomatic Family Model” to explain the relationship between the experience of certain childhood illnesses and family functioning (Minuchin et al., 1975). Their clinical observations suggested that a child’s symptom expression (e.g., seizures, difficulty breathing, etc.) often functioned to distract parents from their conflicts and problems. Minuchin felt that this happened through the parents actively soliciting their sick child’s involvement in their interactions, or by the child intruding into, and interrupting, their interactions. These researchers hypothesized that families of children with psychosomatic illnesses (physical ailments that are worsened by psychological distress) are characterized by four problematic family processes: lack of conflict resolution, enmeshment, overprotectiveness, and rigidity.

There is at least some scientific evidence that is consistent with elements of the Psychosomatic Family Model. For example, children with asthma have been found to intrude into their parents’ conversations to a greater extent than healthy children (Griffin et al., 2002). Griffin and his colleagues observed asthmatic children during a family dinner time conversation and noticed that the children with asthma would start talking immediately after one of their parents disagreed with the other. Children without asthma did not do this. In this family interaction pattern, the sick child appears to deflect parents’ conflicts, and shift attention to him or herself.

An interesting model of family relations and childhood illnesses, referred to as the “Biobehavioral Family Model” (Wood, 2001; Wood et al., 2008) proposes that certain family interaction patterns *influence and are influenced by* the stressor of childhood illness. The family processes are assumed to have the power to exacerbate the child’s symptoms or soothe them, depending upon how extreme they are. The Biobehavioral Family Model has recently proven to be quite useful and valid for understanding childhood asthma, although it is certainly applicable to a range of childhood illnesses (Wood et al., 2008; Wood et al., 2006). The first family process variable in the model is *family emotional climate*. This refers to the intensity and nature of emotional exchanges between family members. Families with a negative emotional climate engage in a lot of criticism, hostility, and verbal attacks that are reminiscent of the expressed emotion seen in families whose members have eating disorders or schizophrenia (see chapter 14). This family climate is also a risk factor for certain childhood illnesses as well. *Parent’s relationship quality* concerns the relationship functioning of the parents, especially in terms of conflict, hostility, and rejection versus mutual support and understanding. Once again, the more negatively toned this relationship is, the more the child is at risk. *Relational security* reflects the positive versus negative emotions that the child experiences when in the presence of the parent, and the extent to which the child desires to be physically close to the parent. Finally, *biobehavioral reactivity* is a term used to describe the nature of the family’s physiological, emotional, and behavioral responses to emotional stimuli. Does the family have a generally calm demeanor, or do they fly off the handle at the slightest problem? Wood et al. (2008) note that effective emotional regulation buffers, and emotional dysregulation, exacerbates the effects of stress on the body’s psychophysiological mechanisms. Families with a more negative emotional climate, low parental relationship quality, minimal parent–child relational security, and high biobehavioral reactivity have an environment that is ripe for childhood psychosomatic illnesses. A visual illustration of the Biobehavioral Family Model as applied to explaining childhood asthma appears in Figure 15.2.

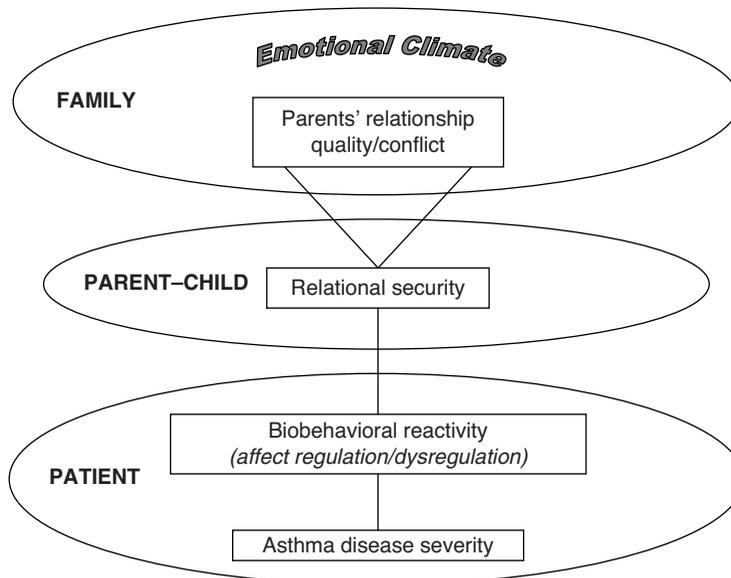


Figure 15.2 The biobehavioral family model.

Reprinted from Wood, B.L., Miller, B.D., Lim, J., Lillis, K., Ballow, M., Stern, T., & Simmens, S. (2006). Family relational factors in pediatric depression and asthma: Pathways of effect. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 45, 1494–1502. © 2006, with permission from Elsevier.

Families have to make serious adjustments in their communication behaviors in order to effectively cope with the stress of chronic childhood illness. Perhaps one reason why childhood illnesses such as asthma, autism, cystic fibrosis, cerebral palsy, and diabetes have such a pronounced effect on the family is because there is often no expectation for a return to normalcy. The family often has to approach these as lifelong stressors. Family dynamics therefore often become more structured, rigid, overprotective, and less emotionally warm and communicative (Meijer & Oppenheimer, 1995; Wamboldt & Wamboldt, 2000). Sometimes the intra-family strain of caring for a child with chronic illness can lead to conflict between parents and children (McCubbin et al., 1982). Are these simply family responses to the stressor? Not necessarily. Current views of childhood illness and family interaction dynamics suggest that these are both consequents of chronic childhood illnesses as well as factors that actually exacerbate or ameliorate symptoms of the child's illness. This is an exciting development in family science as it elevates family communication variables to a causal level in the course of childhood illness.

Summary

The experience of a major childhood illness drastically alters family interaction. Parents must assume intense caregiving roles, often at stages in the lifecycle when they expect their children to start becoming less reliant on them. Childhood diabetes is an example of a major childhood illness that promotes family stress, even though some families manage the disease well by virtue of positive moods and effective communication. There is strong evidence that family conflict makes children more susceptible to a variety of illnesses, less likely to get over those illnesses quickly, and prone to poorer health even in the future. Researchers have found support for some models that explain the link between family interaction and childhood illness. The Psychosomatic model proposes that children may develop physical symptoms so as to “distract” parents from other immediate family conflict. Closely related, the Biobehavioral

model explains that negative family interactions have the potential to exacerbate children's existing health problems.

Family Interaction and Adolescent Substance Use and Abuse

Young people who get involved in drugs, alcohol, and smoking are assuming numerous health risks. For instance, smoking is a major risk factor for diseases of the respiratory system, including emphysema and lung cancer. The use of various hard drugs can lead to long term addiction and dependence, and sometimes damaging neurological side effects. Although heavy alcohol consumption can have negative health implications over extended periods of use, for young people the most immediate health risk is associated with driving a car while intoxicated and involvement in high risk behaviors (e.g., unprotected sex, fights) after drinking.

Family Dynamics

Certain maladaptive family dynamics and atmospheres can predispose adolescents toward substance use. The families of substance using teens tend to be less cohesive, less adaptable, and exhibit less togetherness than families of non-using teens (Malkus, 1994). Lack of perceived support and encouragement from family members and weak sibling and parental relationships predispose adolescents to drug use (Rhodes & Jason, 1990). Negativity and conflict in the family are also positively correlated with adolescent drug use (Shek, 1998). Shek's study of adolescents' drug use in Hong Kong implicated many of the same family environment variables as those identified in American investigations. In chapter 14 we discussed the important role of family expressed emotion (e.g., communication that is critical, hostile, and reflective of overinvolvement) in such psychological problems as schizophrenia and eating disorders. It is apparent that this same noxious form of parental communication increases the odds of children getting involved in substance abuse (Schwartz, Dorer, Beardslee, Laori, & Keller, 1990). Other family dynamics that predispose young people to substance abuse include low bonding in the family and few rewards for positive behaviors (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992).

One toxic family behavior that appeared repeatedly in the literature on mental health problems was neglect and abuse. Victimization of this sort plays a powerful role in development of substance abuse and initiation of substance use at an earlier age (Jarvis, Copeland, & Walton, 1998; Kilpatrick et al., 2000; Lee, Lyvers, & Edwards, 2008; Sheridan, 1995). In their study of over 4000 adolescents, Kilpatrick et al. found that a history of physical or sexual abuse was associated with a 3 to 4 fold increase in alcohol abuse, and an 8 to 12 fold increase of abusing hard drugs. How does child physical or sexual abuse culminate in later substance abuse? There are numerous theories. One explanation offered by Sheridan (1995) is that childhood abuse is often perpetrated in family environments where the parents themselves are substance abusers and where the family's functioning is otherwise defective. Sheridan explains that children reared in such an environment are likely to become substance abusers themselves due to problems created by these environments, such as low self-esteem. Drug and alcohol use might represent a maladaptive coping strategy for people with a history of physical or sexual abuse (Kilpatrick et al., 2000; Min, Farkas, Minnes, & Singer, 2007). This is sometimes referred to as "self-medication." Jarvis et al. (1998) discovered an interesting pattern in their research participants who were being treated for substance abuse and/or child sexual abuse. They noted that people with a history of sexual abuse were clearly self-medicating and had low self-esteem, but that these individuals were three times more likely to be using stimulants than those without a history of such abuse. It seems that these women might be turning to stimulants to induce a self-protective state of hyper-vigilance. Jarvis and her associates noted that unfortunately self-medicating with drugs and alcohol is counterproductive in that intoxication only increases the risk of subsequent victimization. What is common to most theories and

hypotheses that link child abuse with adolescent substance abuse is a maladaptive effort at coping with psychological problems (e.g., depression, anxiety, low self-esteem) and interpersonal problems (e.g., family conflict, boundary violations).

Parenting

The family can also influence adolescent substance use through problematic or ineffective parenting (Hawkins et al., 1992). For example, inconsistent parental discipline and skewed parenting, in which one parent is overinvolved and the other is overly permissive, are risk factors for initial drug use in adolescents (Kandel & Andrews, 1987; Ziegler-Driscoll, 1979). A combination of low parental support and high parental control has proven to be a particularly noxious combination of parenting behaviors that is predictive of numerous mental health problems (see chapter 14) in addition to adolescent substance use (Barnes, Farrell, & Cairns, 1986). Excessive hostility from fathers and harsh punishment practices by mothers also seem to predispose adolescents to early alcohol use (Johnson & Pandina, 1991). These parenting behaviors and family environments can push the adolescent away from the family, rejecting traditional family beliefs and values, and toward socialization with deviant peers (Blackson, Tarter, Loeber, Ammerman, & Windle, 1996; Harbach & Jones, 1995). Noteworthy in the Harbach and Jones (1995) study is the finding that parents of at-risk adolescents held similar beliefs and values as other parents, but their children did not share these values.

Some longitudinal studies indicate that defective parenting behavior may precede offspring substance abuse by many years (Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002). A landmark study by Shedler and Block (1990) found that mothers of children who were frequent users of marijuana at age 18 were unresponsive to their child and gave him or her little encouragement during an observation at age five. Mothers of would-be substance abusers in Shedler and Brock's study appeared cold, critical, and pressuring when they interacted with their young child. Similarly, parents who exhibited less directive control and assertiveness while interacting with their 4-year-old children were more likely to become the parents of heavy marijuana using adolescents some years later (Baumrind, 1991). Baumrind (1991) found that authoritative parenting (see chapter 7) protects adolescents from problem drug use. During the instability of adolescence, the structure and control that authoritative parents provide can be a benefit to children. The key elements of the authoritative parent that minimize adolescent substance abuse according to Baumrind are strong mutual attachments that persist throughout adolescence and coherent and consistent management policies.

One parental management strategy that appears to be quite effective at postponing or reducing the likelihood of adolescent substance abuse is parental monitoring and supervision (Hawkins et al., 1992; Ledoux, Miller, Choquet, & Plant, 2002). Parents who monitor and supervise their children know where their children are, even when away from home, and they know who their children are with. To illustrate, Barnes, Reifman, Farrell, and Dintcheff (2000) interviewed adolescents annually from age 13 to 16. To assess parental monitoring, they asked "How often do you tell your parents where you're going to be after school?" and "How often do you tell your parents where you're really going when you go out evenings and weekends?" The results of this study showed that this sort of parental monitoring was associated with lower levels of alcohol misuse and a lower acceleration into alcohol misuse over the 13–16 year age range. The benefits of this parenting behavior are two fold. First, these parents maintain active awareness of what their children are up to. This gives parents an edge when it comes to steering their children away from problematic situations and peers that could pave the way to substance abuse. Second, there is a communicative function to parental monitoring and supervision. As much as adolescents may "dislike" supervision, it can send the message that (1) someone notices them, and (2) someone cares about them. These are powerful messages that can do much to build self-esteem and self-confidence—two barriers in the road to substance abuse.

Verbal interaction between the parent and child can also play a role in minimizing substance abuse, at least in some instances. Having at least one available parental figure (i.e., a parent whom the child can talk with openly) is associated with lower levels of substance use (Kafka & London, 1991) and abuse (Booth-Butterfield & Sidelinger, 1998). For sons, ease of communication with parents has been linked with lower use of alcohol and smoking, however, parental communication had no significant impact on daughters' substance use (Luk, Farhat, Iannotti, & Simons-Morton, 2010). Youth with the highest levels of drug involvement are those who have extreme levels (either a lot or none) of parent/family members who could talk with them about drugs (Kelly, Comello, & Hunn, 2002). Youth who had no one to talk to them about drugs may have perceived that there would not be any negative sanctions for taking drugs. They may also have perceived that no one cared, and the drug use could have even been an attention-seeking behavior. Youth who had many people talk to them about drugs may have been known to be using drugs already or have strong attachments to peer groups who are perceived to use drugs. Thus, it might not have been that the parental/family communication had diminishing effects because it saturated them and prompted them to use drugs (although that is plausible). More likely, the drug use preceded the parental communication in cases where parent-child communication about drugs was frequent. Ultimately Kelley and her associates (2002) argued that "parent-child communication serves as a strong protective factor with respect to youth involvement with substances, and . . . parents may be a more potent influence than they might perceive themselves to be" (p. 783). With over 82,000 research participants in their study, this assertion rests on a solid empirical foundation.

Contrary to the idea that parental communication has a positive impact, a few researchers have found that the effects of parent-child communication regarding risky behaviors such as adolescent tobacco and alcohol use are "unimportant and detrimental at worst" (Ennett, Bauman, Foshee, Pemberton, & Hicks, 2001, p. 59). Now, as these researchers caution, they did not control for the impact of communication style. Perhaps the communication did not make a positive impact as a result of the way the message was communicated (e.g., it was controlling or excessively punitive). Indeed, parental discussions focused on rules and reprisals appear to cause adolescents who have already tried smoking and drinking to increase their use, though the small effect here should be taken with caution (Ennett et al., 2001, p. 59). Further, some parents say they do not want their kids to smoke or drink, but the parents themselves engage in these behaviors. As we will see in a moment, this discrepancy between what parents say and do usually weakens the impact of what parents say. Ennett et al. found that parents who smoke themselves talk more frequently about rules. The authors suggested that these parents may be advocating current social opinion against youth smoking even though it contradicts their own behavior. Parents who drink talk less frequently about rules. Social norms for drinking are not clear-cut, and parents may be confused about the appropriate message to communicate to their children. It is clear that parents who send mixed messages (e.g., contradictions between what they say and do) or take a heavy-handed, punitive approach to preventing or stopping their children's substance abuse are likely to find that their communication has a boomerang effect.

Social Learning

According to social learning theory (see chapter 2), one mechanism by which people acquire behaviors is through observation of others (Bandura, 1977). This process is known as observational learning, or modeling. When we see people rewarded for performing a behavior, we are more likely to enact that behavior. Social learning theory explains that people learn if-then relationships by observing others. So for example, an adolescent might learn "if I smoke cigarettes, then I will look cool and mature." This could be learned by observing parents, siblings, peers, and even media characters who smoke. Consistent with the predictions of social learning theory, parents who drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, and/or use illicit drugs are more

likely to have children who do the same. For this reason, social learning theory is currently one of the dominant theories of adolescent involvement in substance use and abuse (Botvin & Tortu, 1988; Howard, 1992; Simons, Conger, & Whitbeck, 1988).

When it comes to substance use the relationship between parents' behavior and children's behavior is striking. Ennett et al. (2001) observed that "the effect of parental substance use behavior on adolescent behavior suggests that what parents communicate nonverbally by what they do is more important than what they say" (p. 60). Drug and alcohol use by peers and parents is one of the most powerful predictors of adolescent drug and alcohol involvement (Johnson & Pandina, 1991; Kandel & Andrews, 1987). Regardless of their intentions, parents who use drugs and alcohol in the presence of their children send a powerful message that this behavior is acceptable and perhaps even desirable. This greatly increases the odds of adolescent children getting involved in substance use. For example, a study of high school students revealed a strong correlation between students' substance use and that of their parents (Malkus, 1994). In another study of prisoners enrolled in substance abuse programs, 54% indicated a family history of parental alcohol or other drug problems (Sheridan, 1995). A national household probability sample of over 4000 adolescents showed that a history of family drug use increases the odds of adolescents' abuse/dependence on alcohol, marijuana, or hard drugs by factors of 1.89, 4.14, and 7.89 respectively (Kilpatrick et al., 2000). In other words, adolescents whose family members use drugs are anywhere from two to eight times more likely to be abusing and/or dependent on drugs themselves, compared to those in families without a history of drug use. Also, it is not just parents who teach substance use to their children through modeling. Older siblings have been demonstrated to have an even more powerful modeling effect for drug use than parents (Brook, Whiteman, Gordon, & Brook, 1988). Earlier we noted that low family cohesion is associated with adolescent substance use and abuse. Oddly enough, family cohesion seems to offset the effect of parental modeling. Dougherty and Allen (1994) followed a group of adolescents over a period of six years. In their sample, 53% of those who lived in a low cohesion family and had a parent who smoked, were themselves smokers by the second wave of data collection. In contrast, only 18% of those living in a high cohesion family took up smoking over the course of the study, despite having a parent who smoked.

In addition to direct effects on adolescents' substance use, family modeling appears to also have some indirect effects on children's involvement in drugs and alcohol. Adolescents whose family members are involved in drug use not only take more drugs themselves, but they are also more likely to associate with drug using peers (Bahr, Hawks, & Wang, 1993). It stands to reason that family drug use normalizes the behavior, making it seem natural to hang out with others who do the same. Of course, this only serves to intensify the modeling effect through additional, non-family sources of modeling.

Social learning of substance use stems from peer models as well as family models. One way that family communication and parenting indirectly influence substance use is by potentially corrupting the ill effects of peer models. A recent study of over 2,500 high school students showed that positive parenting practices such as parental modeling, expressing acceptance of the child, and good parent-child communication were associated with a reduced number of peers and friends who drank alcohol, which in turn was associated with less drinking (Nash, McQueen, & Bray, 2005). So, one important way that positive family environments protect their offspring from substance use is by reducing the likelihood that their children will associate with substance using peers who could otherwise have a bad influence.

Summary

Adolescent substance use and abuse are usually preceded by and/or occur in a family context marked by conflict, low cohesion, criticism, lack of parental support, and sometimes abuse and neglect. The authoritative parenting style with its strong parent-child bond and consistent

disciplinary practices has proven to be associated with a lower probability of adolescent drug and alcohol abuse. It is often the case that parents can have a positive influence on their adolescents when it comes to drugs and alcohol by simply being available to talk with them about these issues. Finally, the family is a powerful context for acquiring substance abusive behaviors by observing them modeled by parents and older siblings. Sometimes actions speak louder than words and adolescents learn that substance use is normative and desirable by decoding the actions of their family members. Repetti et al. (2002) theorize that many of these negative family dynamics and interaction patterns create deficits in children's management and expression of emotions, along with additional social skills deficits. For many of these adolescents, substance abuse becomes a way to compensate for these deficiencies and a mechanism for self-medication in order to cope with the emotional distress produced by such family environments.

Family Interaction and Sexual Health

The sexual behavior of young people, like consumption of drugs and alcohol, can pose a variety of health risks. Young people who are not in long-term monogamous relationships can be particularly vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases and infections, including HIV/AIDS and human papillomavirus, some of which can cause cervical cancer. Furthermore, despite the fact that people do not often think of it as a health problem, pregnancy is a major health risk for women. For these reasons sexual behavior can be a pathway to potential health problems. Even though this is the case for all human beings, young people are particularly vulnerable to some of these health risks.

As we will show in this section, family communication and the social climate in the family have an undeniable relationship with adolescents' and young adults' sexual behavior. However, we must note from the outset that in many family contexts parental advice and influence on young people's sexual behavior is potential that is never realized. There are a multitude of factors that greatly interfere with this sort of family influence. For example, in American culture people are generally reluctant, or ambivalent at best, about openly discussing sex. Furthermore, some parents are personally uneasy with the topic of sex, perhaps not even discussing it with their partners. As strange as this might sound for a couple with children, it is far from out of the ordinary. People who are not secure in their own thoughts and feelings about sexuality are unlikely to provide effective input to their children on the topic. Perhaps the greatest obstacle to frank parent-child communication about sexuality is parents' reluctance to think of their children as sexual beings. Even the most cosmopolitan and progressive parents are often not ready to think of their 12- or 13-year-olds as being sexual. When families cannot come to grips with this reality the consequences can be sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies for people who are physically able to acquire them but not psychologically prepared to cope with them.

Parents appear to have a multitude of reasons for avoiding communication with their teens about sex. Jaccard, Dittus, and Gordon (2000) investigated this issue and came up with five general categories of concerns that mothers had about talking with their teens about sex and birth control. These are illustrated in Figure 15.3, along with sample items that Jaccard et al. used to measure the concerns. The two dominant concerns endorsed by mothers were embarrassment and a fear that she would not be taken seriously by the teen were she to raise the topic.

Can family communication about sex influence children's sexual behaviors in a beneficial way? There is some evidence to suggest it can. Early parent-adolescent sexual communication is associated with later age of sexual initiation, more consistent condom use, and fewer sexually transmitted diseases (Hutchinson, 2002). A related study revealed that 70% of sexually active 13-18 years olds who reported discussing condom use with their parents actually used a condom at last sex, compared to only 53% of sexually active adolescents who never had talked

| | |
|---|---|
| Concern that the discussion be would embarrassing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “It would embarrass me to talk about sex and birth control with my son.” • “It would embarrass my son to talk with me about sex and birth control.” |
| Concern that the teen would not take the parent seriously | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “My son would not take me seriously if I tried to talk with him about sex and birth control.” • “My son does not want to hear what I have to say when it comes to talking about sex and birth control.” |
| Concern that the teen would think the parent is prying | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “My son would think that I was nosy if I tried to talk with him about sex and birth control.” • “My son will think that I do not trust him if I try to talk with him about sex and birth control.” |
| Concern that the teen would ask the parent something that she does not know | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “It would be difficult for me to explain things if I talked with my son about sex and birth control.” • “If I talked about sex and birth control with my son, he might ask me something I don’t know the answer to.” |

Figure 15.3 Maternal concerns about talking with teens about birth control.

Adapted from Jaccard, J., Dittmus, P.J., & Gordon, V.V. (2000). Parent–teen communication about premarital sex: Factors associated with the extent of communication. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 15, 187–208. Copyright © 2000 by SAGE Publication. Reprinted by Permission of SAGE Publications.

about condoms with their parents (Hadley et al., 2009). Also, families with generally open lines of communication are more likely to discuss sexuality as well as HIV/AIDS with their children (Powell & Segrin, 2004). The beauty of this type of family communication is that it is positively associated with discussing HIV/AIDS with dating partners. In accord with social learning theory (see chapter 2), Powell and Segrin (2004) hypothesized that the modeling of communication about HIV/AIDS in the family context has a disinhibitory effect when young people converse with their dating partners. Also relevant to social learning theory is evidence that there may be an intergenerational effect for parent–child communication about sex. Parents who are more satisfied with the sexual health communication that they received from their parents report more extensive sexual communication with their own children (Byers, Sears, & Weaver, 2008). In other words, grandparents might actually set the stage for the sexual health communication between parent and child.

Open lines of communication between parent and child appear to be beneficial in terms of delaying the initiation of sex in adolescents. Bonell et al. (2006) followed over 6000 students aged 13/14 for a period of 2.5 years, until they were 15/16. Girls who, at age 13/14, reported that it was difficult to communicate with their parents were significantly more likely to have had sex by the time they were 15/16 than those who did not report such difficulty. Also, girls and boys with parents who were less strict, especially in terms of attitudes toward the children going out, were significantly more likely to have had sex by age 15/16. It is now apparent that both the *quality of the parent–child relationship*, as measured by their general communication, warmth, and closeness, and *sexual communication* each have independent effects on age of adolescents’ first intercourse (Davis & Friel, 2001). This suggests that even parents who are uneasy about talking to their adolescent about sex can still influence the adolescent’s behavior through generally positive communication and parenting practices. Keep in mind, too, that there are cultural variations in the extent to which families openly discuss highly personal topics such as sex. For example in Asian American families, parental messages about adolescent sexuality are conveyed implicitly, sometimes through silence, and nonverbally (Kim & Ward, 2007).

We should also note that children are exposed to many risky behaviors (e.g., unprotected sex) through the media. Communication scholars generally believe that children listen carefully to how their parents respond to viewing risky behaviors when watching television together. Parents who openly and critically discuss media portrayals of risky behaviors with their children appear able to cultivate skepticism and social resistance skills in their children (Austin, 1993, 1996; Fujioka & Austin, 2002). It is possible that covieving (parents watching television with their children) allows parents to seize upon “teachable moments” from the media portrayals and that this parent–child communication then slows the adolescent’s initiation of sexual behavior (Bersamin et al., 2008).

Not surprisingly, some of the factors that predict parent–child communication about sex are rooted in parents’ attitudes and beliefs about sex and sexuality. For example, mothers’ self-efficacy (i.e., belief in their capability to talk effectively with their child) and comfort level with discussing sex are both positively associated with initiating communication about sex with their preadolescent children (Byers et al., 2008; Pluhar, DiIorio, & McCarty, 2008). A related study of over 600 parent–adolescent dyads recruited from middle schools in New York City replicated the effect for parental efficacy and comfort as important predictors of parent–child communication about sex (Guilamo-Ramos, Jaccard, Dittus, & Collins, 2008). However, Guilamo-Ramos et al. additionally found that this type of communication was more common in mothers with high self-esteem and in mothers who felt that talking about such topics would not cause them or their child any embarrassment. This embarrassment factor was especially an issue in mother–son communication about sex. Also, parents who believe in the effectiveness of preventative and protective measures such as condoms and birth control pills are more likely to discuss sex with their children than parents who do not believe as strongly in the effectiveness of these measures (Swain, Ackerman, & Ackerman, 2006).

It is clear that children who talk with their parents about sex are less likely to be sexually active, less likely to become pregnant, and more likely to use contraceptives (Crosby & Miller, 2002). But do parents and their children actually discuss these topics? The answer depends on the sex of the parent, the sex of the child, and the specific issue. The overwhelming pattern of evidence shows that family communication about sex is primarily initiated by mothers (Miller, Kotchick, Dorsey, Forehand, & Ham, 1998; Wyckoff et al., 2008). Miller et al.’s findings indicate that 60% of daughters and 42% of sons have discussed with their mother when to start having sex and 57% of daughters and 31% of sons have discussed issues such as birth control. Having stated that, the gender of the child also appears to play a role in family communication about sex. Parents are more likely to talk with their daughters than their sons about sex (Byers, et al., 2008; Swain et al., 2006) and this is especially pronounced in mother–daughter dyads (see also Coffelt, 2010). In contrast, father–daughter communication about sex occurs much less frequently than mother–daughter communication (Wyckoff et al., 2008). This may reflect the fact that in many domains of parent–child communication, society grants more latitude to mothers than fathers, and messages about sex exchanged between older males and younger females, regardless of their relationship, are often viewed with suspicion and discomfort. This later effect could be a spillover from non-family contexts (e.g., work, school) where such messages are prohibited and socially sanctioned.

Thus, it appears that most family communication about sexuality is going on between mothers and daughters. However, that occurs only in about 60% of the families surveyed, and when it does, it is not clear how in depth or extensive these conversations are. Aside from discussions with their mothers, about a third of adolescents report that they talked with their siblings about sex (Pistella & Bonati, 1998). This is a reminder that family influences on sexuality can emanate from sources other than parents. In general, the research findings show that children are willing to talk with their parents about sexuality but that it is essential for parents to be supportive and open in order for this type of family communication to be effective (Warren, 1992).

In addition to the exchange of messages explicitly about sexuality, adolescent sexuality can also be influenced by more general family environment factors that are enacted through family communication. Family dynamics such as cohesion and expressiveness as well as parental warmth, support, and monitoring are all positively associated with willingness to talk with parents about STDs, the expectation that parents will respond by being helpful, and with slowing adolescents' involvement in sexual behaviors (Markham et al., 2010; Rosenthal, Cohen, Biro, & De Vellis, 1996). One way that parental warmth and involvement can serve to decrease the likelihood of adolescent pregnancy is by reducing risk taking behaviors (i.e., delinquency and substance use) that are precursors to risky sexual behavior in adolescents (Scaramella, Conger, Simons, & Whitbeck, 1998). Comparable to the findings for substance use, parental monitoring has been linked with delayed onset of sexual activity in teens (Longmore, Manning, & Giordano, 2001). The common denominator in both cases (i.e., substance use and sexual behavior) might also be the avoidance of high risk situations guided by parental monitoring. So, cohesion, warmth, involvement, and monitoring can have both direct and indirect effects on adolescent sexuality. Elsewhere in this chapter we discussed how excessive parental control and discipline are actually associated with increases in adolescent substance use. The same holds true for sexual behavior. Strong parental control is associated with a greater probability of adolescent sexual risk behaviors (Rodgers, 1999).

A sense of family connection and structure goes a long way toward minimizing involvement in sexual behaviors at a young age (Markham et al., 2010). A research study conducted in the inner city of Detroit shows positive family environments can combat an extraordinarily high probability of risky sexual behavior. Danziger (1995) conducted in-depth life history interviews with 80 African-American women, ranging in age from 15–20 years old, who resided in ghetto communities. Among those who had close family ties, 73% did not become sexually active until age 15 or later. In contrast, 69% of those who had weak family ties or high conflict in their families had sex prior to age 15. The same pattern holds for family routines: 69% of those whose family maintained routines delayed having sex until at least age 15 versus only 31% among those whose families were disorderly or chaotic. There seemed to be two common themes in life stories that Danziger collected from people who had experienced late and/or minimal sexual activity: (1) their parents put a strong emphasis on doing well in school, and (2) the family had a well-developed set of rules concerning dating and socializing. This study shows how families can help to positively structure the lives of their children through direct communication about issues such as dating, as well as emphasizing other activities (e.g., school) that could at least temporarily displace early involvement in sexual activity.

Just as the family can have positive influences on adolescents' sexual behavior so too can the family exert negative influences. Various forms of child maltreatment, including physical and sexual abuse, are associated with high rates of adolescent pregnancy and greater likelihood that these pregnancies are actually intentional (Rainey, Stevens-Simon, & Kaplan, 1995; Smith, 1996). Needless to say, family environments that perpetrate child maltreatment usually have other forms of severe dysfunction. Such families are notorious for producing children with deficits in social competence and emotional expression (Repetti et al., 2002). Unfortunately, this creates a substantial vulnerability to manipulation and exploitation later in life. In other words, it is not just that child maltreatment creates psychosocial problems for its victims, but that these young people then find their way to peers and partners with unscrupulous motivations.

Summary

Family communication about sex can alter the course of adolescents' sexual behaviors. Families that have good cohesion, open communication, a supportive climate, rules, and an organized structure appear to raise adolescents who delay involvement in sexual behavior, have fewer sex partners, use contraceptives, and have a relatively low incidence of unplanned pregnancy. Families that have high levels of conflict, chaos, and child maltreatment have the opposite

effect on the sexual behavior of their offspring. Research shows that parents who attempt to curtail their children's sexual behavior with heavy handed and authoritarian control tactics are likely to produce a boomerang effect. The key to effective family sexual communication appears to be finding a healthy balance between openness and supportiveness on the one hand and guidance and structure on the other. Family interaction patterns with these qualities are associated with the type of social and emotional competence that assists adolescents and young adults in making responsible decisions and avoiding high risk behaviors.

NEGOTIATING COMMUNICATION PROCESSES ASSOCIATED WITH PHYSICAL HEALTH

As we end this chapter, we emphasize two communication processes that most families face as they deal with family members' illness. We have briefly made reference to the first communication process, *caregiving and social support*, throughout this chapter. Here, we highlight just how pivotal it is for families to negotiate this process as well as the dilemmas it can present. In the second process, *privacy management*, we discuss dilemmas that families face regarding whether and to what extent to keep family illness private from those outside the family or even from others in the family.

Caregiving and Social Support

Family social support and care plays a vital role in health and illness. People who have supportive relationships experience fewer health problems than people who lack supportive relationships and/or have a lot of conflict in their relationships (House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988; Walen & Lachman, 2000). By this very fact, family interactions can keep people from developing illnesses in the first place. Exactly how does this work? Cohen, Underwood, and Gottlieb (2000) offer two explanations. First, supportive relationships influence behaviors that have obvious implications for good health, such as exercise, diet, smoking, and adherence to medical regimes. So for example, one reason why men in good marriages are on average healthier than men in bad marriages or men who are not married at all is because their wives urge them to exercise, watch their diet, and get a regular check up at the doctor. Cohen et al. also note that supportive relationships help people to regulate their emotional responses, and these are associated with various physiological responses (e.g., immune, neuroendocrine) that have obvious health implications. As we discussed earlier in this chapter, unsupportive relationships can literally compromise people's physiological fitness. So, before even considering family responses to illness, it is apparent that supportive and caring family relationships can do a lot to minimize the likelihood of certain illnesses occurring in the first place.

When a family member becomes seriously ill, the entire family system can be affected. Ideally, family members respond with social support and in many cases assume the role of caregiver. There is no mistaking that this care and support is beneficial to sick family members. For example, emotional support from family members contributes greatly to cancer patients' adjustment to their illness (Gotcher, 1993), and satisfaction with social support is negatively related to depression in women with breast cancer (Badger, Braden, Longman, & Mishel, 1999). Elderly people who require institutional care in a nursing home tend to be less depressed and more motivated and happy to the extent that they are satisfied with the social support that they receive from their family members (Carpenter, 2002). How the care and support are communicated is obviously quite important. The communication between family caregivers and their spouses with dementia appears to be most effective when the caregivers are respectful, less controlling, and more supportive of their spouses (Small, Perry, & Lewis, 2005). For the most part, supportive communication and care from family members seems to lessen the burden of being ill especially when it is delivered with care and understanding.

It is important to add one caveat to the declaration that family care and support is helpful to the sick individual. As we will discuss momentarily, providing care to an ill family member is stressful. This stress can contribute greatly to conflict and poor relational quality between the caregiver and care receiver. Consequently, it is sometimes the case that receiving family care is not always beneficial to the care receiver (Edwards, 2001). Edwards noted that sometimes people being cared for by family members are no better off than those in long-term care facilities. When the care itself becomes a major source of dissension and conflict in the family, the benefits of family caregiving appear to disappear.

Unfortunately, providing care to sick family members comes at a cost. Family scientists have begun to realize that the act of providing care and support does not just affect the ill family member but the provider as well. For instance, effectively providing care for an elderly family member with Alzheimer's disease demands a substantial adjustment in caregiver communication patterns, requiring shorter, simpler sentences, avoiding interruptions, and asking one question or giving one instruction at a time (Small & Gutman, 2002; Small, Gutman, Makela, & Hillhouse, 2003). Some caregivers may have difficulties making these necessary adjustments to their communication, or may experience frustration when their communication no longer has the desired effects when interacting with the family member with Alzheimer's. Increases in communication problems that are associated with the progression of dementia are a major factor in the experience of burden among family caregivers (Savundranayagam, Hummert, & Montgomery, 2005). Savundranayagam et al. (2005) found that both semantic communication problems (e.g., having difficulty naming objects) and pragmatic communication problems (e.g., asking the same question over and over) were associated with stress and burden for family caregivers, yet these are unfortunately common communication problems when interacting with people who have dementia. Given the myriad communication problems associated with providing care to a family member with dementia and the degenerative nature of the condition, it is perhaps not surprising that there is a great deal of uncertainty that caregivers have to deal with (Polk, 2005) that only worsens the caregiver's stress.

Caring for an ailing elderly family member often creates a psychological burden on caregivers. Caregivers can become susceptible to depression when they find themselves disagreeing with other family members about how to care for the family member with Alzheimer's disease (Speice, Shields, & Blieszner, 1998). Providing care to a family member with Alzheimer's disease can be physically and emotionally draining. As it turns out, the family environment (e.g., organization, conflict avoidance, avoiding guilt induction) is more strongly associated with the well-being of Alzheimer's caregivers than the severity of the actual disorder (Fisher & Liberman, 1996). If there are otherwise problems in the family environment such as poor problem solving and disturbed expression of emotions such as anger and sadness, caregivers of family members with dementia tend to experience considerable burden (Heru, Ryan, & Iqbal, 2004). In addition, family members caring for their relative with dementia experience less burden and exhibit more effective communication to the extent that they had a high level of relationship satisfaction with the dementia patient before the onset of the illness (Steadman, Tremont, & Davis, 2007). These findings illustrate how family interactions and relationship qualities can play a vital role in keeping caregivers from getting overburdened and burned out, or how they can contribute to the caregiver's rapid demise when she or he experiences further agitation through these interactions.

We should not leave the topic of family caregiving with the impression that it is all bad for the caregiver. Some family caregivers report positive aspects of caring for their loved one such as feeling good inside and feeling valued for the care that they provide (Heru et al., 2004). People who care for elderly family members experience both the frustrations and rewards of role reversals where they are now in the "parent" role and the parent is in the "child" role (Miller, Shoemaker, Willyard, & Addison, 2008). For some people, this becomes a part of their identity and is a reflection of their family values and competence to be able to provide the needed care (Miller et al., 2008).

Just as sick family members benefit from social support, so too do family care providers. Research on family caregivers of patients who had a stroke indicates that availability of social support is positively associated with caregivers' life satisfaction and negatively with their symptoms of depression (Grant, Elliott, Giger, & Bartolucci, 2001). Acquiring information and coping with helplessness are two of the primary needs of family members of cancer patients (Northouse & Northouse, 1988). Social support from both health care providers and other friends and family could be instrumental in assisting with these needs, thus allowing family members to better withstand the burden and distress of caring for their sick relative.

Sometimes the need to provide care for a family member can be a very difficult issue for the family to discuss. After all, a serious discussion of caregiving requires an acceptance of the reality facing the sick or frail family member. Pecchioni (2001) studied this phenomenon by asking adult daughters and their mothers about their preferences for discussing the mothers' needs for care. She found that over three quarters of the mothers and daughters felt that no such conversations were even necessary. Upon closer examination, Pecchioni (2001) discovered that about a third of these mother–daughter dyads were motivated by denial. In other words, many did not want to even think about the mother's declining health and its implications for their relationship. The very fact that daughters used denial as a “coping mechanism” is indicative of the stress and burden that caregivers undertake by merely thinking about the deteriorating health of a close family member.

Privacy Regarding Family Health

In some families, people find it difficult to tell people outside the family about the health issue or illness, because of fear of rejection from family (e.g., in the case of teen pregnancy) or because it was someone in the family who caused the health issue (e.g., in the case of child physical or sexual abuse or spousal abuse) (Caughlin & Petronio, 2004). Earlier in this chapter, we discussed the tendency for many parents, especially fathers, to avoid discussing sexuality at all with their children. Some parents' privacy boundaries regarding sexuality may be so closed that they in fact prefer that their children just “find out what they need to know” from someone outside the family.

In other families, illnesses or health problems are a family matter that members do not wish to share with persons outside the family. They keep, as we learned in chapter 3, *whole family secrets* regarding the illness. This is especially likely if the illness carries with it a stigma that the family members themselves are trying to understand, let alone share with an outsider. Caughlin and Petronio (2004) summarized research regarding adult children who accompany their aging parents in visits to the doctor. Unless the parent and adult child have carefully negotiated what is to be kept as a whole family secret and what information can be public, the adult child often discloses “too much” information to the physician or contradicts the parent against the parent's wishes. What ensues is a struggle over how to manage the parent's impression to the physician. Still another challenge for families is how to deal with information regarding physical health that is only known by some family members. When older adults require care from adult children, they often find it necessary to disclose information that they once kept private from their children (e.g., bodily needs, financial issues) (Caughlin & Petronio, 2004; Petronio & Kovach, 1997).

Major and sudden illnesses in children often pull together two sets of potentially antagonistic motivations on the part of health care providers and families. On one hand, health care providers need to solicit private information from the parents (Duggan & Petronio, 2009). At the same time, parents expect to manage and control the provision of information while simultaneously and intensively pursuing information from the health care team. This can make for an emotional and stressful interaction. According to Communication Privacy Management theory (Petronio, 2002), people believe that they have ownership of their private information

and that they develop rules for controlling that information. Developing, modifying, and adhering to such rules in the heat of the moment (e.g., a child's sudden illness) does not always function seamlessly and smoothly. According to the theory, such a situation is ripe for turbulence and breaches of privacy, perhaps out of necessity and in the service of the child's welfare. Imagine for example an infant who has seizures and must be rushed to the hospital. The infant's mother might dread having to disclose that she drank alcohol during her pregnancy. However, the dire health situation of the child pulls for her to break her own rules about information privacy, and now she not only has to deal with the stress of her child's illness but the seriously face-threatening self-disclosure that she never wanted to make. Communication Privacy Management theory is useful for understanding how and why serious child health conditions can be particularly stressful on families for reasons that go far beyond the illness per se (Duggan & Petronio, 2009).

Privacy Management Regarding Life-threatening Childhood Illness

When the illness involves the child and the parents know information about the child's health status that the child does not even know, the situation is especially complicated. It is difficult to think of a more dramatic family stressor than a child afflicted with a life-threatening illness. Among the multitude of dilemmas and challenges that families face in such situations is how to communicate with the child about his or her illness. There are two approaches that have been described in the family health communication literature (Share, 1972). Families that opt for a *protective* approach try to shield the sick child and any siblings from the reality of the illness and its ultimate consequences. The idea behind the protective view is that family members' emotional well-being is best if they are kept from knowing just how badly off the sick child is. Parents who take this approach carefully manage the flow of information to the sick child and his or her siblings. It is predicated on the assumption that sick children do not have coping mechanisms that are sufficient for dealing with such devastating news. However, the protective approach has been criticized on grounds that it can isolate children from discussions of their condition and actually create more anxiety and uncertainty. In contrast, the *open* approach is based on allowing children and their siblings to inquire about the illness with knowledge that they will get honest and straightforward answers. The idea behind the open approach is that it is impossible to live life as if nothing is wrong and deny the sick child's natural curiosity and concern. Proponents of the open view feel that the child should be able to rely on family members as trustworthy sources of information. In a recent study with families of pediatric oncology patients, there was clear evidence that some parents prefer the protective approach whereas others opt for the open approach (Young, Dixon-Woods, Windridge, & Henry, 2003). Most parents in this study preferred to first learn about the diagnosis without the child being present. However, their motivation was not so much to shield the child from information about the illness as to be able to manage their own emotional reaction and convey a sense of hope to the child. Some of the families in this study developed what Young et al. (2003) characterized as a "partnership model," where the roles of the parent and child became more equal during discussions of the illness. These families had very open communication about the illness. At the same time, other parents assumed an "executive" role, managing what and when children were told about their illness. There is probably no singularly "correct" way to manage communication with a terminally ill child. Decisions about how much to tell the child, and to what extent the parents serves as a gatekeeper between the child and physician, are best made on a case by case basis taking into consideration the emotional and cognitive maturity of the child along with his or her coping skills. Nevertheless, Young et al.'s (2003) research shows that this is an exceptionally complex balancing act that parents of terminally ill children must manage. Having to continually weigh the pros and cons of these different communication styles undoubtedly adds to the stress of an already catastrophic family situation.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have examined the way families communicate about health issues, for example, how much privacy they practice and how they offer caregiving/social support. We have also studied how family communication contributes to the development and course of family health problems. There are some take-home messages regarding the negative and positive effects of family communication on health. In both marital and parent–child relationships, the stress induced by hostile conflict and negative family interaction leads to compromised health. Risky behaviors such as substance abuse are often an individual’s attempt to self-medicate or escape his/her negative family environment. Of course, the result usually leads to even poorer functioning. In parent–child relationships, controlling punitive behaviors as well as permissive parenting are associated with risky adolescent behaviors. Parents who monitor their children’s behavior, talk openly and supportively with their kids, and avoid mixed messages regarding their own words and behaviors can buffer their children from risky behaviors that lead to poor health. In the case of spouses, those who avoid excessive conflict and offer support to each other boost their health status. Even when one spouse develops a health problem, if the couple was happy before the illness, they can weather the illness better, sometimes even drawing closer. Further, spouses and parents who promote positive attitudes and communication are better able to manage existing health conditions in the family. In the end, family interaction has a lot to do with our physical health, for better or worse.

16 Family Violence and Abuse

In this chapter we explore one of the dark sides of family relationships by considering the causes, correlates, consequences, and explanations of family violence and abuse. The concept of family violence encompasses a wide range of noxious behaviors perpetrated within the family. As we show later in this chapter, these family problems are pervasive in American society, and they have long lasting and ranging consequences.

We believe that family violence and abuse can be understood as dysfunctional communication behaviors. In Dudley Cahn's analysis of family violence, he argued that "From a communication perspective, these behaviors are redefined as acts or actions with intention (from a message sender's point of view) or with perceived intention (from a message receiver's point of view). In addition, these acts or actions may be verbal (words) or nonverbal (symbolic actions besides words) or both" (Cahn, 1996, p. 6). Cahn suggested that like any communicative act, family violence has an instrumental dimension (task accomplishment or goal attainment), a relational dimension (e.g., commitment, love, conflict, jealousy), and an identity dimension (a reflection of how the sender feels about him- or herself). Research on family violence and abuse shows that the instrumental aspect of the behavior often involves trying to establish or maintain power in an interpersonal relationship. This might entail influencing a spouse to do something or a child to stop doing something. There is a powerful relational dimension to abusive and violent behavior. The perpetrator may feel frustrated or powerless, but the victim often harbors feelings of love or commitment to the perpetrator that prevents a departure from the relationship. Finally, problematic identity issues are almost always associated with family abuse and violence. The violence often occurs because the perpetrator is dissatisfied with his or her perceived identity in the relationship. In keeping with the theme of family violence and abuse as a communication behavior, we focus in this chapter exclusively on family/relational/interpersonal aspects of and approaches to family violence and abuse. However, it should be pointed out that numerous biological, environmental, and psychological issues also contribute to abusive conduct in family contexts.

Communication researcher Mary Anne Fitzpatrick (2002) suggested that there are three powerful myths that inhibit a clear understanding of family violence. The first myth is that family violence is about men beating women. As we will show throughout this chapter, family violence also includes women aggressing against men, parents aggressing against their children, men aggressing against men, and women aggressing against women. There are even some cases where adolescents are abusive toward their parents (Eckstein, 2004). The second myth that Fitzpatrick dispels is that all abusers are alike. Research on marital violence reviewed later in this chapter indicates that there are distinct subtypes of abusive spouses. Family violence is a complex behavior perpetrated by different people for different reasons. The third myth described by Fitzpatrick is that violence is an isolated act. Unfortunately, abuse and violence are rarely one-time occurrences. In some cases they are perpetrated over the course of

years if not decades. This is undoubtedly one reason why the consequences of family violence can be so long lasting.

In the remainder of this chapter, we examine some of the different forms and functions of family abuse and violence. What are the different types of family violence and how common are they? To answer this question we begin with definitions of different types of family violence, followed by a brief analysis of the prevalence of family violence. The majority of the chapter covers three types of family violence and abuse: physical abuse of children, sexual abuse of children, and violence in the marital subsystem. This is followed by a brief analysis of the current facts on elder abuse. What are the family dynamics that are conducive to this type of behavior? Why do parents abuse their children? What are the effects of abuse on children? Why do spouses abuse their partners? These are some of the pressing questions that are badly in need of answers. Although scientific knowledge does not allow for definitive answers to each of these questions, currently available research provides a good starting point. This research shows that for virtually all types of family abuse and violence, interactions and relationships in the family system have problems that extend far beyond the abusive behavior itself.

DEFINITIONS AND VARYING FORMS

Family violence is “the intentional intimidation, physical and/or sexual abuse, or battering of children, adults, or elders by a family member, intimate partner, or caretaker” (Alpert, Cohen, & Sege, 1997, p. S3). As this definition illustrates, terms like “domestic violence,” “family violence,” and “child abuse” are fairly generic concepts that refer to several different abusive family processes. The distinction between some of these sub-processes is important from a scientific perspective because different abusive family processes appear to have different antecedents and consequents. In Table 16.1 we provide definitions for most different types and subtypes of family violence and abuse. Note from these definitions how some caustic family processes are acts of commission (e.g., child physical abuse, marital violence) whereas others are acts of omission (e.g., child physical neglect, child emotional neglect). People often think of abusive family processes as negative things that family members say or do to each other. However, sometimes what family members fail to say or do can be as problematic, if not more so, than the acts they actually commit. For example, the consequences of child neglect could be every bit as severe as child abuse. Furthermore, we would argue that the relational message sent by child neglect is comparable to the message that is sent by abuse. In each case, a sense of worthlessness and devaluation is clearly imparted to the child. Many of these dysfunctional family processes (e.g., aggression, violence, neglect) constitute what communication researchers refer to as “hurtful family environments” that can have toxic relational and psychological effects (Vangelisti, Maguire, Alexander, & Clark, 2007).

Abusive family processes can be grouped into three general categories: child maltreatment, marital/intimate partner violence, and elder abuse. We will focus our analysis in this chapter on child maltreatment (namely physical abuse and sexual abuse) and marital violence, followed by a brief analysis of elder abuse. We selected these focal points because they represent the major areas of research in family violence and abuse and because there is some evidence (reviewed later in this chapter) to show a connection or interrelation between these different family processes.

INCIDENCE AND PREVALENCE

How common is family violence and abuse? The exact answer to this question may never be known. It can be said with certainty that most cases of family violence and abuse occur outside the awareness and attention of the general public. Therefore, researchers must rely on data

Table 16.1 Family violence and abuse concepts and definitions

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- **Family Abuse and Violence:** act(s) carried out with the intention, or perceived as having the intention, of physically hurting another person (Gelles & Straus, 1979)
 - **Child Abuse:** the physical or mental injury, sexual abuse, negligent treatment, or maltreatment of a child under the age of eighteen by a person who is responsible for the child's welfare under circumstances which would indicate that the child's health or welfare is harmed or threatened thereby (Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974, Public Law 93-237)
 - **Physical Abuse:** the infliction of physical injury as a result of punching, beating, kicking, biting, burning, shaking or otherwise harming a child. The parent or caretaker may not have intended to harm the child, rather the injury may have resulted from over-discipline or physical punishment (National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information, 2000)
 - **Sexual Abuse:** the engagement of a child in sexual activities for which the child is developmentally unprepared and cannot give informed consent (Berkowitz, Bross, Chadwick, & Whitworth, 1992)
 - **Emotional Abuse:** acts of commission that include confinement, verbal or emotional abuse or other types of abuse such as withholding sleep, food, or shelter (National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1988)
 - **Physical Neglect:** acts of omission that involve refusal to provide health care, delay in providing health care, abandonment, expulsion of a child from a home, inadequate supervision, failure to meet food and clothing needs, and conspicuous failure to protect a child from hazards or danger (National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1988)
 - **Emotional Neglect:** acts of omission that involve failing to meet the nurturing and affectional needs of a child, refusal to provide psychological care, delays in providing psychological care, and other inattention to the child's developmental needs (National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1988)
 - **Marital or Intimate-Partner Violence:** intentional violent or controlling behavior by a person who is currently, or was previously, in an intimate relationship with the victim (Massachusetts Medical Society Committee on Violence, 1996)
 - **Elder Abuse:** the physical, psychological or financial abuse or neglect of the elderly that may be intentional or unintentional (American Medical Association, 1992)
-

sources such as self-reports by parents and children, and police records. The use of self-report data for measuring incidence and prevalence of family violence is fraught with problems. How many people are willing to admit that they have abused their child? The stigma and fear of legal repercussions for their parents may motivate children to deny ever having been abused. Reliance on police records is equally problematic as many cases of abuse are perpetrated without ever being brought to the attention of the police.

The available data on marital violence indicate that it is a pervasive problem in American society. Up to 30% of all injuries to adult women that result in visits to hospital emergency rooms are the result of battering (McLeer & Anwar, 1989). According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (1994) the annual rate of intimate partner violent victimization is 5 per 1000 for women and 0.5 per 1000 for men. Data from the National Family Violence Surveys (Gelles & Straus, 1988) indicate that in 16% of households surveyed some kind of violence transpired between spouses in the past year. This same data set shows that women initiate marital violence at least as frequently as men (Stets & Straus, 1990). However, compared to husbands, wives are more likely to be violent in the context of self-defense and to use less severe forms of violence. This may explain the higher victimization rate for women noted above in the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Finally, about 25% of all couples report at least one act of physical violence at some point in their marriage (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980).

Like intimate partner violence, the findings on child maltreatment show that it is also a pervasive problem in our society. Approximately 3 million reports of child maltreatment are received annually by Child Protective Service and police departments throughout the U.S., about 40% of which are substantiated (Miller & Knudsen, 1999; U.S. Department of

Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, 2006). The Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4) indicates one-year incidence rates of child maltreatment between 1 in 25 to 1 in 58, depending on the definition and standards used to identify cases of abuse and neglect (Sedlack et al., 2010). These cases break down into 58% physical abuse, 27% emotional abuse, and 24% sexual abuse. These values sum to more than 100% due to some cases involving multiple forms of abuse. The NIS-4 also revealed that children living with their married biological parents experienced the lowest, and those living with a parent and cohabiting partner had the highest, rates of maltreatment (Sedlack et al., 2010). The majority of child maltreatment cases (81%) were perpetrated by biological parents, and among those who were maltreated by a biological parent, mothers were the perpetrator in 75% of the cases and fathers were the perpetrator in 43% of the cases. Several different sources converge to suggest that over 1000 children are killed each year by their parents or caretakers (Gelles, 1998), an act known as filicide. About 11% of all females and 4% of all males age 15 or over have been victims of severe sexual abuse (MacMillan et al., 1997).

Collectively, findings on family violence and abuse show that these corrosive behaviors are common in today's families. When one considers that many cases of abuse and violence are never observed or reported, it is likely that many of the statistics reported above represent under estimates of the actual rates of violence and abuse in the family.

PHYSICAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN WITHIN THE FAMILY

As highlighted in Table 16.1, physical child abuse involves the infliction of physical injury on the child. In some cases, this may be an unintended consequence of a disciplinary behavior taken too far. In other cases, physical harm to the child might be intentional. Communication researchers Steve Wilson and Ellen Whipple (1995) argued that “physical child abuse is an interactional event; that is, it arises out of communication patterns that occur during discipline episodes” (p. 301). From this perspective physical child abuse could be viewed as a dysfunctional form of parent–child communication that escalates to destructive extremes. Research on physical abuse of children reveals a number of disturbed family environment variables that help to define the family context in which this behavior occurs. Next, several theories of physical child abuse are discussed, followed by an analysis of some of the psychosocial consequences of physical child abuse. These family risk factors and their consequences are previewed in Figure 16.1.

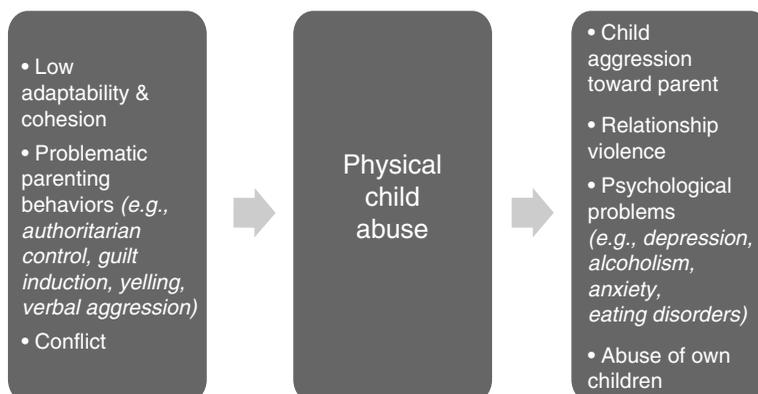


Figure 16.1 Family environment risk factors and psychosocial consequences of physical child abuse.

Associated Family Environment Factors

One issue that complicates the potential understanding of child abuse is the fact that the physical abuse of children does not occur in a vacuum. Rather, families who abuse their children reliably exhibit a host of other social and psychological problems. Whether these problems are causally related to the child abuse or the result of it are not fully known. However, understanding these family environment factors is a vital first step in comprehending how and why families sometimes abuse their children.

Low family *adaptability* and *cohesion* have repeatedly been linked to child abuse (e.g., Higgins & McCabe, 1999; Pelcovitz et al., 2000; Stith et al., 2009). For example, Pelcovitz et al. (2000) interviewed abused adolescents and found that they perceived their families to be less adaptable (i.e., more rigid) and less cohesive than nonabused adolescents perceived their families to be. Adults who were abused as children also report low family adaptability and cohesion (Higgins & McCabe, 2000). Higgins and McCabe found that such family environments were particularly prevalent among multiply abused (e.g., physical abuse and sexual abuse) offspring. The low cohesion between abusive parents and their children is even evident in the discourse of abusive parents as they talk about their child. When parents were interviewed about caregiving and their relationship with their child, the narrative accounts of the most abusive parents were lacking in detail, coherence, sensitivity to the child, and acceptance of the child (Sprang, Clark, & Bass, 2005). Patchner and Milner (1992) developed a Child Abuse Potential Inventory as a screening device for physical child abuse. It contains items that measure rigidity, unhappiness, problems with the child, problems with the family, and so forth. People who score high on this inventory also score low in family cohesion and family adaptability. The pattern of low adaptability and low cohesion is often referred to as “affectionless control” (Parker, Barrett, & Hickie, 1992). In such families, there is a rigid and strict enforcement of discipline to the point of overprotection, combined with virtually no genuine affection or caring. This is a particularly noxious combination of family environmental factors that is powerfully associated with a host of mental health problems later in life (Segrin, 2001b; see also chapter 14).

A related line of research shows that there are often a number of *problematic parenting behaviors* in families of abused children. Abusive mothers tend to use authoritarian control tactics, anxiety-induction, and guilt-induction, in addition to practicing inconsistent discipline (Susman, Trickett, Iannotti, Hollenbeck, & Zahn-Waxler, 1985). Observations of abusive mothers interacting with their children revealed a high percentage of aversive behaviors such as hitting, grabbing, and pushing, and a low percentage of positive affect expressions such as approval, encouragement, and hugs (Lahey, Conger, Atkeson, & Treiber, 1984). Mothers with a high potential for physical child abuse have also been observed to exhibit lower levels of soliciting/affirming behaviors (e.g., asking the child questions, praising the child) when playing with their child (Wilson, Morgan, Hayes, Bylund, & Herman, 2004). To further illustrate parenting problems associated with child abuse, parents were asked about their ways of handling irritating child behaviors, such as a child who would not stop crying (Disbrow, Doerr, & Caulfield, 1977). Abusive parents said that they yelled at their child who would not stop crying whereas nonabusive parents indicate that in such cases they would pick up, hug, or distract the child. Abusive parents in Disbrow et al.’s (1977) study also perceived lower levels of communication between themselves and their children compared to that of nonabusive parents. There is also evidence that the communication of parents at risk for child abuse is marked by high levels of verbal aggressiveness (Wilson, Hayes, Bylund, Rack, & Herman, 2006), which is the tendency to attack and belittle the target’s self-concept. Collectively, these problematic parenting behaviors could be best characterized as aversive behaviors, which tend to be the cluster of parenting behaviors that best distinguishes abusive from non-abusive parents when observing their interactions with their children (Wilson, Rack, Shi, & Norris, 2008).

Conflict is another family phenomenon that is obvious in families of abused children. The potential for child abuse goes up to the extent that there is a great deal of conflict in the family (Higgins & McCabe, 2000; Patchner & Milner, 1992; Stith et al., 2009). Violent families have a notoriously difficult time resolving conflicts (Martin, Schumm, Bugaighis, Jurish, & Bollman, 1987). Martin et al. (1987) found evidence of this in that family violence was unrelated to adolescent compliance. It therefore seems that these families have poor conflict management skills and resort to violence, even though it is an ineffective strategy for control or resolution of conflicts.

Theories of Physical Child Abuse

In efforts to understand why family members perpetrate child abuse, social scientists have developed numerous theoretical explanations of child abuse. Even though each theory or hypothesis contains its own set of assumptions and postulates, it is important to note that child abuse is a complex phenomenon. A single explanation will never be sufficient to understand why the problem exists. Different instances of child abuse may be best explained by different theories. With that caveat in mind, the following represents some of the interpersonal or socially oriented theoretical explanations of child abuse that are currently in circulation (see Gelles, 1985, 1998; Kashani, Daniel, Dandoy, & Holcomb, 1992; Miller & Knudsen, 1999; Milner, 1998, for reviews).

Social Learning Theory

According to social learning theory (see chapter 2) people acquire behaviors by observing them enacted by a model. The social learning model of child abuse holds that many abusive parents were themselves abused as children. In other words, they observed the actions of their parental role models and later enacted the same abusive actions when they became parents. As noxious as abusive parenting is to a child, it can create a cognitive representation of parenting that depicts the abusive behavior of children as normative. Later in this chapter we address some of the consequences of child abuse and will revisit this intergenerational transmission of abuse effect in a bit more detail.

Family Systems Theory

The family systems theory explanation of family violence focuses on dysfunctional relationships within the family and between the family and its external environment. As we noted earlier in this chapter, family environments in abusive households are clearly suspect. Notwithstanding the child abuse, there is still something wrong with the parent–child relationships in most of these families. Families who abuse their children are often under varying forms of stress and isolation (Gelles, 1985; Sprang, Clark, & Bass, 2005). The issues in the relationship between the family and its external environment contribute to the risk of abusive behaviors for those internal to the family system. According to systems theory, family members play an active role in influencing each other and their environment. Accordingly, one could view many of their problems as self-generated.

Social Situational/Stress and Coping Theory

This theory explains the situations under which abuse and other forms of family violence occur. The first factor is structural stress combined with a lack of family coping resources. So for example, a family with a low income and a disabled member is clearly under considerable structural stress. If such a family did not have sound coping resources at their disposal, they would be at risk for abuse and violence. The second factor of this theory is a cultural norm for the use

of violence and force. In societies that condone, perpetrate, or glamorize violence, this sort of behavior will be seen as more acceptable than in societies where violence is shunned. Family abuse and violence is therefore seen as an amalgamation of structural stress and social norms. The family under stress that lacks effective coping resources will be prone to abuse and violence. If the family exists in a larger society that condones violence, they are likely to enact these behaviors as a means of coping with their stresses. Of course the hallmark sign of poor coping is the failure to recognize that misguided efforts at coping with stress only generate more stress.

Social Cognition Theories

In models built on social cognition, abusive parents are viewed as people with unrealistic and rigid expectations for children (Slep & O’Leary, 2001). This causes them to define a broad range of child behaviors as “misbehavior” or “failure” to meet standards held by the parents. Often these parents attribute malicious intent to their children’s “misbehavior” and get easily angered by it. Social cognition models also focus on poor problem solving skills among abusive parents. Earlier we examined findings showing that abusive parents attempt to solve a child problem (e.g., nonstop crying) with strategies such as yelling at the child, whereas nonabusive parents would pick up or distract the child. The interpersonal problem solving method of the abusive parent is grossly ineffective, serving to only worsen the problem, thereby leading to greater frustration and anger for the parent. These negative emotions are then likely to increase the risk for child abuse.

Attachment Theory

Some have attempted to explain child maltreatment as an attachment disorder (e.g., Schmidt & Eldridge, 1986). In chapter 2 we discussed how attachment theory assumes that early experiences with a caregiver contribute to the formation of internal working models of human relationships. In ideal cases, the caregiver and infant will form a close and secure attachment during this early period. However, parent–child relationships can be marred by attachment disorder when the parent is unwilling or unable to perform the tasks necessary for promotion of the child’s growth. The parent may feel ambivalent about his or her role and may be unable to fulfill the child’s needs. In such cases where the parent and child never formed an attachment bond, there is an assumption of a high risk for child abuse.

Psychosocial Consequences of Child Physical Abuse

Child Aggression Toward Parents

There is fairly compelling evidence that parent- to-child aggression is positively associated with child-to-parent aggression (Brezina, 1999; Meredith, Abbott, & Adams, 1986). Brezina (1999) explains this connection by noting that children may learn that violence is at least partially effective at reducing noxious stimulation (i.e., physical aggression) from the abusive parent. In addition to showing that parents’ aggression prompts aggression from the children, his analysis shows that aggression from the child tends to deter aggression from the parents. In such cases, children are negatively reinforced (i.e., removal of noxious stimuli) for their aggression and bound to repeat it. A meta-analysis of 88 studies involving over 30,000 people revealed an interesting connection between corporal punishment, child abuse, and child aggression (Gershoff, 2002). The use of corporal punishment (behaviors that do not result in physical injury such as slapping and spanking) is positively associated with perpetrating physical child abuse (behaviors that risk injury such as punching, kicking, or burning). Furthermore, parents’ use of corporal punishment is positively associated with their

children's aggression (Gershoff, 2002). Of course, many cases of physical child abuse are misguided attempts at discipline or punishment that were taken too far. Ironically, parents' use of physical aggression toward their child, while possibly effective at securing compliance in the short run, is associated with *greater* aggressive behavior from the child, including aggression directed toward the parent him- or herself in the long run. Clearly, parents who physically abuse their children send the message that aggression is an appropriate behavior in the family system, while elevating the risk of child-to-parent aggression in the service of self-defense and deterrence.

Adult Aggression Toward Partners

Given that child abuse is associated with aggressive behavior in children, even toward their own parents, it is perhaps no surprise that child abuse is also associated with aggression toward intimate partners later in life. Several studies of dating violence show that it is more prevalent among young adults who were abused as children (e.g., Marshall & Rose, 1990; Simons, Lin, & Gordon, 1998). The Simons et al. (1998) study is noteworthy for showing that corporal punishment of children is significantly and positively associated with later violence in dating relationships. They explain that "corporal punishment teaches that it is both legitimate and effective to hit those you love" (p. 475). Even exposure to verbally abusive parental behaviors, namely verbal aggressiveness, is associated with an increased risk of committing intimate partner violence among young adults (Palazzolo, Roberto, & Babin, 2010).

The ill effects of child abuse appear to persevere into marital relationships as well. A meta-analysis of 39 studies that included close to 30,000 people revealed a significant relationship between experiencing child abuse and perpetrating spousal abuse (Smith et al., 2000). In general, it appears that experiencing child abuse creates a greater likelihood of committing subsequent spousal abuse. Once again, this may be due to the fact that children learn to accept and associate violence in the context of a close relationship. What is perhaps even more alarming is the fact that child abuse also appears to increase the risk of being a *victim* of spousal abuse (Smith et al., 2000). Palazzo et al. (2010) found that exposure to parental verbal aggressiveness increased the risk of young adults being either a perpetrator or a victim of intimate partner violence. Some children learn a victim role from being abused by their parent(s). Even though such individuals are not to blame for subsequent victimization later in life, their behaviors and cognitions may predispose them to further abuse. One simple explanation for this could be that people with a history of accepting and tolerating abusive conduct may be attractive to would-be perpetrators.

Psychological Problems

One of the more consistently documented consequences of child abuse is the experience of psychological problems. These include depression, alcoholism, loneliness, anxiety, personality disorders, and eating disorders to name but a few (Bornstein, 2005; Downs & Miller, 1998; Kashani, Burbach, & Rosenberg, 1988; Segrin, 2001b). These issues are covered in more detail in chapter 13. For the time being, it will suffice to say that parental abuse communicates a message of rejection and devaluation. In the majority of cases, psychological damage caused by such messages far outlives physical pain or injury. This is because children may internalize these aversive experiences and develop a negative self-image. In addition, abuse presents a very confusing task to the child, namely reconciling the pain and degradation that is inflicted with a supposedly positive and nurturing idealized image of a parent. As difficult as child abuse is for adults to comprehend, it is surely far more difficult for a child to make sense of. This can therefore lead to a lack of trust in others or an excessive neediness that will bring with it a host of psychological problems associated with affect regulation. Some of these problems

might contribute to difficulties with abused children's nonverbal communication such as in the processing of emotional facial expressions (Pollak & Tolley-Schell, 2003), decoding affective communication (Brown & Nowicki, 2007), and regulation of personal space (Vranic, 2003).

Intergenerational Transmission of Child Abuse

According to social learning theory, children would learn how to be parents first and foremost by observing their own parents' behavior. If abusive behaviors are modeled, children may be inclined to repeat those behaviors later in life when they are parents. This is the reasoning behind the intergenerational transmission hypothesis. It is evident in findings which show for example that parents who were hit as teenagers by their parents are more likely to be verbally (i.e., insult, swear at, or threaten) and physically abusive toward their own children (Tajima, 2002). Physical abuse during childhood often results in dissociation (poorly integrated and processed emotion, behavior, and identity) as a means of coping (Narang & Contreras, 2005). Unfortunately, the dissociation that allows a person to cope with trauma also increases the potential for the abused survivor to abuse his or her own children (Narang & Contreras, 2005). The idea that abused children will someday go on to abuse their own children has been met with mixed support and has been discussed from different perspectives in the research literature (e.g., Margolin & Gordis, 2000; Miller & Knudsen, 1999). It appears that about 20–30% of all abused children go on to be abusive parents (Oliver, 1993; Straus & Gelles, 1990). Therefore one obvious conclusion is that most abused children *do not* repeat the mistakes of their parents by growing up to abuse their own children. On the other hand, consider the fact that only 5% of parents in the general population abuse their children, implying a six-fold increase in abuse rates as a function of a childhood history of abuse (Kaufman & Zigler, 1987). From this vantage point, the intergenerational impact of child abuse looks far more compelling. This is a case where there are multiple ways of interpreting the research findings. Most abused children do not go on to abuse their own children, but a history of child abuse greatly increases the risk of later perpetrating child abuse. The fact that so many abused children do not go on to abuse their own children shows that there is no deterministic intergenerational transmission. Other factors must also be present to translate receiving abuse into perpetrating abuse (Margolin & Gordis, 2000).

SEXUAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN WITHIN THE FAMILY

The sexual abuse of children can be extremely difficult to understand. Some of the clearest theoretical accounts of this noxious behavior are still wanting for more explanation. It is evident that childhood sexual abuse (CSA) virtually always occurs in family systems that have numerous other serious problems. Scientists have been working diligently to understand the unique effects of CSA, and the distressed family environments in which it occurs, on children who experience sexual abuse. From a communication perspective CSA presents a confusing array of messages, mixing affection with devaluation with gross boundary violations. The prevalence of CSA between parental figures and children is perhaps reflective of a failure to internalize the parental role, and a consequent willingness to grossly exploit children for personal gain or fulfillment. Of the different types of family violence and abuse covered in this chapter, childhood sexual abuse is perhaps the least understood, and therefore the most in need of further research and theory development. A synopsis of the family research on CSA is presented in two sections, one that covers family environment factors associated with CSA and one that explores psychosocial consequences of CSA. A preview of these factors is presented in Figure 16.2.

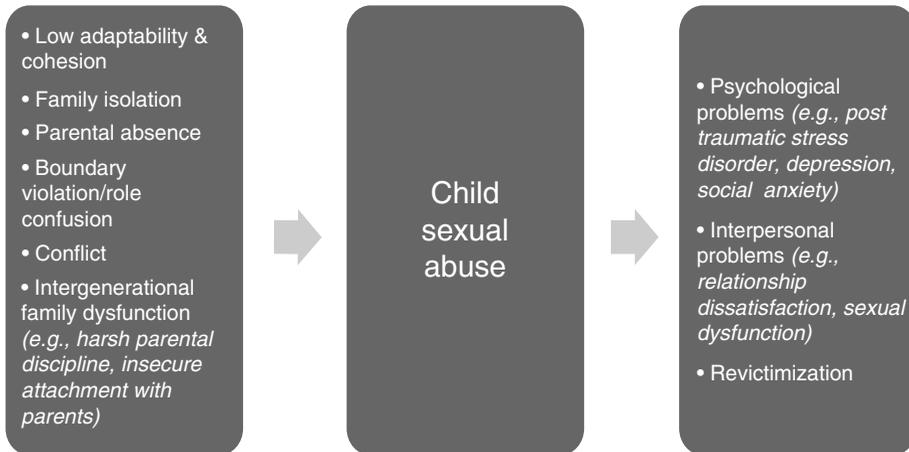


Figure 16.2 Family environment risk factors and psychosocial consequences of child sexual abuse.

Associated Family Environment Factors

Despite the fact that some writers tend to discuss physical and sexual child abuse together, the two phenomena are sufficiently distinct to warrant separate analysis. However, readers will notice that some of the same family characteristics that are associated with child physical abuse are also associated with child sexual abuse. These might represent general signs of family pathology that create a nonspecific risk for several different maladaptive processes and outcomes. At the same time, there are certain family processes that have been linked only to child sexual abuse.

Family cohesion has proven to be a powerful discriminator between those families that perpetrate CSA versus those that do not (e.g., Alexander & Lupfer, 1987; Benedict & Zautra, 1993; Harter, Alexander, & Neimeyer, 1988; Hulsey & Sexton, 1992; Ray, Jackson, & Townsley, 1991). The general pattern established by these studies is that cohesion is perceived to be lower in those families where there are cases of CSA. Low family cohesion indicates a weak emotional bond between family members. It is this weak bond, particularly between the parent and child, which might allow the parent to sexually abuse a child absent the empathy or concern that would ordinarily prevent such acts. At the same time, recall that in Olson's circumplex model (see chapter 1) both low and high levels of cohesion are thought to be dysfunctional.

Even though most large survey studies reveal low family of origin cohesion among CSA victims, there is reason to believe that in perhaps a smaller number of cases very high cohesion, or enmeshment, is a problem. Alexander (1985) presented two compelling case studies of remarkably high enmeshment in families that perpetrated CSA. In both cases, the families kept mostly to themselves and avoided people outside of the family system. In one family there was so little separation among members that one individual would answer questions asked of another. In this same family, property was shared among the members including a toothbrush and undergarments. The documentation of ultra high cohesion in some families with CSA fits with findings discussed below on boundary ambiguity—a phenomenon that goes hand in hand with enmeshment. Faust, Runyon, and Kenny (1995) pointed out that enmeshment is often manifest as overinvolvement between the father and the child victim.

Problems with *family adaptability* have also been documented in the CSA literature. Once again, the general pattern is one of lower adaptability (i.e., rigid family dynamics) in the families of origin of CSA survivors (Alexander & Lupfer, 1987; Harter et al., 1988). This pattern might be manifest for example in a very strict and authoritarian style of parenting

(Hulsey & Sexton, 1992; Nash, Hulsey, Sexton, Harralson, & Lambert, 1993). Participants in Hulsey and Sexton's (1992) study described their families as rigidly ruled in an authoritarian style. These family environments appeared to be particularly repressive. Once again it is important to note that very high levels of adaptability could be equally problematic according to the circumplex model. Below we present findings on role confusion or role reversal in families that perpetrate childhood sexual abuse. Such role reversals are hallmark signs of chaos or extremely high levels of adaptability.

Another theme that appears repeatedly in the literature on CSA is *family isolation*. It is common for survivors of CSA to have been reared in families that were largely cut off from society (e.g., Alexander, 1985; Harter et al., 1988; Herman & Hirschman, 1981a; Hulsey & Sexton, 1992). Isolation does not necessarily imply that the family lives in a rural area, although that would be one obvious avenue to isolation. Some families achieve and maintain isolation simply by keeping to themselves and not interacting with others outside of the immediate family system. In other words, it is social isolation more than mere physical isolation that is predictive of CSA. This isolation appears to be conducive to CSA because the family is for the most part outside of the watchful eye of those who might recognize the dysfunctional family environment and perhaps act to correct the situation. Family isolation might also be a manifestation of rejecting societal standards and norms. In the terminology of family systems theory, this isolation is evidence of a relatively closed family system.

Related to family isolation is a pattern of *parental absence* that appears to create a heightened risk for CSA in the family of origin. It is often the case that mothers are, for various reasons, unavailable in the families that perpetrate CSA (Benedict & Zautra, 1993; Madu, 2003). Sometimes mothers are unavailable due to foster care, serious illness, employment outside of the home, or simply too many other children to look after. An unusually compelling case for the impact of parental absence can be found in the Benedict and Zautra (1993) study. They examined over a dozen family of origin variables among CSA survivors and corroborated the assessments with collateral data from siblings. Their results showed that parental absence was a more powerful risk factor for CSA than any of the other variables assessed (including cohesion, conflict, control, step-parent family, and so on). They explain that parental absence creates a family environment that is conducive to CSA. This may be due to a lack of supervision by a parent who could potentially protect the child from the other exploitative parent. Alternatively, parental absence may make it difficult to fully meet the child's emotional needs. This could lead to a high need for affection and attention on the part of the child, making him or her susceptible to sexual exploitation from unscrupulous family members.

It is virtually true by definition that child sexual abuse represents a gross *boundary violation/role confusion/role reversal*. Family scientists regularly find that there are significant problems with role confusion and role reversal in families that perpetrate CSA (Faust et al., 1995; Hanks & Stratton, 1988; Herman & Hirschman, 1981b; Koopmans, 1994; Parker & Parker, 1986). In Herman and Hirschman's (1981b) investigation, 45% of women with a history of incestuous father-daughter contact had assumed a maternal role in the family, often by the age of 8 or 9, compared to only 5% in a control group. Koopmans (1994) found an equally strong association between CSA and role confusion (i.e., feeling like the parent-child relationship was another type of relationship, such as a sibling relationship) in the family of origin. Virtually every participant in this study who had experienced CSA had also experienced role confusion in the family of origin. Hanks and Stratton (1988) describe this family dynamic as one in which "parents come to depend on the child to provide the caregiving they need . . . Sexual abuse may also involve a reversal of care or supply of needs" (p. 249). Herman and Hirschman (1981b) explain that for the female CSA victims they studied "providing sexual services to their fathers seemed to develop as an extension of their maternal family role" (p. 968).

What is the course of action by which role confusion or role reversal culminates in childhood sexual abuse? Extrapolating from the findings presented thus far, it appears that in many

of these families mothers are at least somewhat out of the picture, the families are away from the surveillance of others, and there may be either low cohesion suggesting minimal parental concern for the child, or high cohesion suggesting inappropriate emotional closeness with the child. In either case, perpetrators turn to the child for the sort of relationship one would ordinarily seek from a spouse. In perpetrating such acts, the parent commits a gross boundary violation, exploiting the naïveté of a child and the fact that she is physically present in the family environment when the mother may not be. This explanation is supported by the fact that the same family environment factors that are associated with CSA are also associated with parentification (Fitzgerald et al., 2008) (see chapter 12). Even though the overall family environment may create a conduciveness to this type of maltreatment, it requires no inferential leap to appreciate the fact that something must be seriously amiss in the psychological constitution of the perpetrator to allow for this conduct.

Cases of childhood sexual abuse often occur in families in which there is otherwise a high level of *family conflict* (Benedict & Zautra, 1993; Draucker, 1996; Edwards & Alexander, 1992; Nash et al., 1993). Survivors of CSA regularly indicate that there was more conflict in their families of origin than people reared in families with no CSA. Most of what is known about elevated family conflict and CSA comes from retrospective reports from adult survivors of CSA. For this reason, it is difficult to determine whether family conflict preceded or followed commission of CSA. Childhood sexual abuse could understandably lead to substantial increases in family conflict. On the other hand, high levels of family conflict could create the sort of physical and psychological distance between a parent and the remainder of the family that could then create an environment that is conducive to this type of child abuse.

In addition to all of the above mentioned dysfunctional family processes that appear to create an immediate context for perpetration of CSA, there is also evidence of *intergenerational family dysfunction* leading to CSA. A meta-analysis of 89 different studies showed that poor functioning in the family of origin, more harsh parental discipline, and poor attachment or bonding to parents distinguished those who committed sex offenses against children from non-sex offenders (Whitaker et al., 2008). By now it is perhaps no surprise to learn that the sex offenders against children were also more likely to have had a history of CSA themselves compared to non-sex offenders (Whitaker et al., 2008). These findings suggest that some of the family architecture that promotes CSA is not only in the family of origin of the would-be victim, but in the family of origin of the perpetrator as well.

Psychosocial Consequences of Child Sexual Abuse

Psychological and Interpersonal Problems

Just as with child physical abuse, among the more dominant consequences of CSA are psychological and interpersonal problems (Bennett, Hughes, & Luke, 2000; Koopmans, 1994; Rumstein-McKean & Hunsley, 2001). The psychological problems associated with CSA include for example post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, low self-esteem, and social anxiety (see chapter 14 for a more in-depth analysis of these problems). It is common to observe dissociative symptoms in survivors of CSA. These symptoms are presumed to be a sort of psychological residue of the coping mechanisms that the child used when the sexual abuse was ongoing. The experience of depression following CSA may be particularly consequential as it appears to create a propensity for victims of CSA to go on and physically abuse their own children later in life (Mapp, 2006). In addition to psychological problems, a number of interpersonal problems in adulthood have been linked with CSA such as difficulty forming and maintaining relationships, relational dissatisfaction, social isolation, sexual dysfunction, insecure attachment, and divorce (Rumstein-McKean & Hunsley, 2001; Swanson & Mallinckrodt, 2001). The pervasiveness, severity, and duration of these problems are a testimony to the extremely toxic nature of CSA in the family of origin.

Separating the Effects of Abuse from Family Environment

One issue that has plagued researchers who try to understand the psychosocial consequences of CSA is the fact that CSA is confounded with pathogenic family environments. In other words, CSA does not occur in isolation from other family problems. There is virtually always something else wrong with the family in which CSA is perpetrated (Long & Jackson, 1994). For this reason, scientists have been attempting to understand the unique effects of CSA versus other family dysfunction on children reared in these environments. A number of carefully controlled studies now suggest that dysfunctional family dynamics may be more responsible for the increased psychological adjustment problems that are seen in victims of CSA than abuse per se (Briere & Elliot, 1993; Draucker, 1996; Harter et al., 1988; Nash et al., 1993). When family environment variables such as adaptability and cohesion, parental supportiveness, conflict, and enmeshment are statistically controlled, differences in psychological adjustment problems between sexually abused and nonabused children tend to disappear (but see Kamsner & McCabe, 2000). These analyses suggest that the pathogenic family environments that tend to go hand in hand with CSA (see section on Associated Family Environment Factors above) are more responsible for psychological adjustments problems than the actual abuse itself. Consistent with family systems theory, it appears necessary to understand the larger family context in which childhood sexual abuse is embedded in order to appreciate the psychosocial consequences of this form of maltreatment.

Revictimization

Among the more tragic consequences of childhood sexual abuse is a propensity for revictimization. People who are sexually abused in the family of origin are at increased risk for subsequent abuse by other family members (Herman & Hirschman, 1981b). A history of sexual abuse is also associated with an increased risk of rape or other nonconsensual sexual experiences in adulthood (e.g., Alexander & Lupfer, 1987; Elliot & Briere, 1993; Messman-Moore & Brown, 2004).

Why does CSA increase vulnerability to later sexual assault? Messerman-Moore and Long (2003) argue that two interpersonal mechanisms in revictimization are *exposure risk* (i.e., factors that increase the probability of contact with would-be perpetrators such as high-risk sexual behaviors) and *enhancement of perpetrator aggression* (i.e., factors that increase the probability of a would-be perpetrator acting aggressively such as poor risk recognition, intoxication, or dissociation). These later factors tend to identify the victim as an “easy target” in the eyes of potential aggressors. One other possibility suggested by Alexander and Lupfer (1987) is that CSA may instill an expectation of victimization. They also suggest that abused children may be socialized into a subservient role in a patriarchal family structure. Consequently, survivors of CSA may actually seek out other abusive relationships in their adulthood because this is what is familiar to them (Herman & Hirschman, 1977). This explanation is consistent with related findings showing that CSA victims often recreate family of origin characteristics such as intergenerational intimacy, personal authority, and intergenerational fusion in their families of orientation (Carson, Gertz, Donaldson, & Wonderlich, 1991). Many victims of childhood sexual abuse are socialized into a victim role by their experiences in the family of origin. The psychological template for exploitative relationships that is created by this noxious treatment tends to plague survivors long after they leave the family of origin.

Unfortunately, the revictimization of CSA survivors is not just limited to subsequent sexual assault. People with a history of CSA are also more likely to be the recipient of intimate partner violence later in life (Affi et al., 2010; DiLillo, Giuffre, Tremblay, & Peterson, 2001). It appears that this can be partly explained by psychological problems experienced by CSA survivors (Engstrom, El-Bassel, Go, & Gilbert, 2008). Engstrom et al. (2008) found that women with

a history of CSA were 2.5 to 3 times more likely to have experienced intimate partner violence as women without such a history. At the same time, they found that many of these CSA survivors understandably had mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder and serious psychological distress, and that these mental health problems were significant predictors of intimate partner violence. Engstrom et al. hypothesize that these mental health problems could make women “easy prey” for would-be perpetrators and/or impede their ability to detect and avoid dangerous intimate relationships.

VIOLENCE IN THE MARITAL SUBSYSTEM

Violence in the marital subsystem, also known as “domestic violence” or “intimate partner violence” has been the focus of considerable research attention. This is no doubt fueled by the increased public awareness of domestic violence and its negative consequences for families. In this section of the chapter we review research findings and theories on violence that occur in the marital context. This includes an examination of communication behaviors that occur in violent marriages, followed by a discussion of different types of abusive spouses, and the patriarchal social structure theory of marital violence. The final portions of this section cover the intergenerational transmission of spouse abuse, the association between marital violence and physical child abuse, and violence in gay and lesbian partnerships. Once again, major concepts in the process and context of spousal abuse are previewed in Figure 16.3.

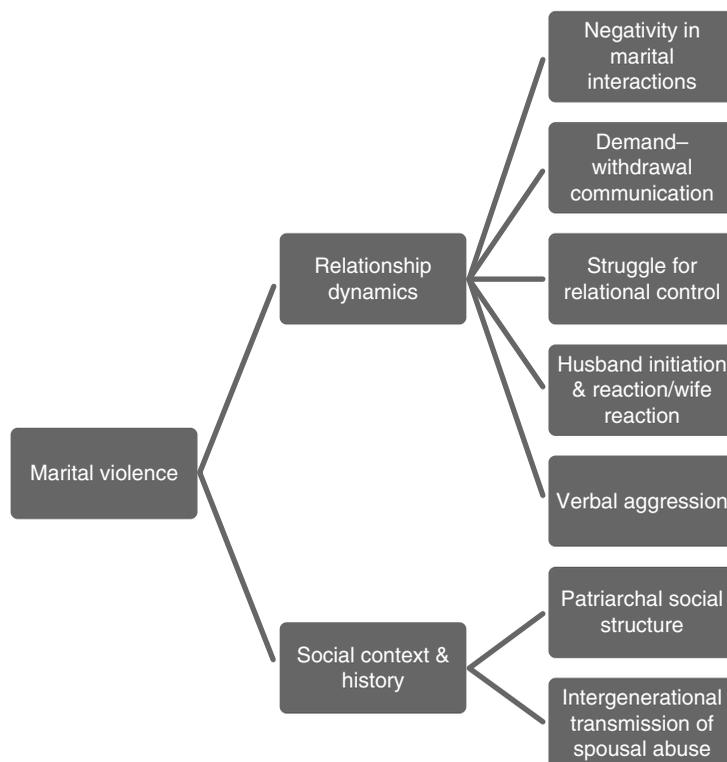


Figure 16.3 Relational and social context factors in marital violence.

Interaction Behaviors in Violent Marriages

Negativity in Interactions

It may come as no surprise to learn that the interactions of violent spouses are marked by a number of negative communication behaviors. In laboratory interactions, maritally distressed and violent husbands expressed more negative affect (e.g., anger, distrust, contempt, belligerence, criticisms, disagreements, put-downs) to their wives than maritally distressed but nonviolent husbands did (Berns, Jacobson, & Gottman, 1999a; Cordova, Jacobson, Gottman, Rushe, & Cox, 1993). Because of the maritally distressed but nonviolent control group, this heightened negativity cannot be attributed to the effect of marital distress. Understandably, negative affect reciprocity is also a problem in violent marriages as it is in distressed marriages (Cordova et al., 1993). However, the strength of this reciprocity is greater in distressed violent marriages than distressed nonviolent marriages. In other words, an aversive interaction behavior by one spouse is more likely to be followed by an aversive behavior from the other spouse in violent compared to nonviolent marriages (Cordova et al., 1993). Couples with a recent history of physical aggression exhibit poor communication skills in the form of hostility and low levels of warmth (Gordis, Margolin, & Vickerman, 2005). During in-home interviews about a typical day in their family, the discourse of abusive couples expressed anger, frustration, and complaints about their spouse (Sabourin & Stamp, 1995). In contrast, nonabusive couples tended to compliment each other and express more joy and contentment with family life. It is also noteworthy that the interactions of violent couples are not entirely devoid of positivity (Lloyd, 1996). Even though Lloyd (1996) discovered high levels of negative communication behaviors (e.g., criticize, ignore) in violent marriages, she also found high levels of positive communication behaviors (e.g., compliment, apologize). This suggests that the negative interactions of violent couples may be part of a larger picture of volatility where a lot of positive and negative messages are exchanged.

Demand-Withdraw

In chapter 11 we reviewed data showing that the demand-withdraw pattern of interaction is associated with marital distress. Recall that this is a form of interaction whereby one spouse, typically the wife, makes a demand for change and the other spouse, typically the husband, withdraws from the interaction. This dysfunctional pattern of marital communication appears to be prevalent in violent marriages. For example, maritally distressed and violent husbands engage in more demand during laboratory interactions than maritally distressed but nonviolent husbands (Berns et al., 1999a). Their battered wives also make more demands than non-battered wives. Researchers believe that high levels of husband *and* wife demand must be understood in their different contexts. Violent husbands appear to be demanding in the context of perpetrating abuse, whereas battered wives are demanding in effort to reduce physical and emotional abuse (Berns et al., 1999a; Berns, Jacobson, & Gottman, 1999b).

When the demand-withdrawal pattern is evident, ordinarily the wife demands and the husband withdraws. However, this pattern is typically reversed in domestically violent marriages, such that the husband demands and the wife withdraws (Babcock, Waltz, Jacobson, & Gottman, 1993). Why are levels of demand so uncharacteristically high for husbands in violent marriages? The power deficit hypothesis of marital violence suggests that people become violent when they perceive themselves as lacking power in the relationship (Babcock et al., 1993). People sometimes confuse the use of physical violence with the possession of power. However, the question is what motivates people to use physical violence in the first place? Babcock et al. argue that in the marital context violence may be seen as a means for acquiring power over a partner, especially when one's communication skills for doing so are otherwise insufficient. These researchers found that the less communicative husbands were, the more

physically and psychologically abusive they were toward their spouses. Also, the less decision making power husbands had, the more violent they were. People often try to get their way in a marriage through verbal negotiation and influence attempts. However, people with poor communication skills may make demands that go unmet because of the nonpersuasive or ineffective way in which they are pitched. In such cases, violence becomes a means that some husbands use to attempt to secure power in the relationship. The irony is that this seemingly powerful heavy-handed behavior is actually the tool of the spouse who feels powerless in the marriage.

Relational Control

Earlier we noted that spousal violence often represents a struggle for control in a marital relationship. This relational dimension tends to be apparent in violent couples' verbal as well as nonverbal behaviors. When aggressive and nonaggressive couples discussed topics such as how they met and decided to get married, how they handle disagreements, and what it takes to have a good marriage, there were more nonsupport and one-up messages uttered in the conversations of aggressive compared to nonaggressive couples (Rogers, Castleton, & Lloyd, 1996). One-up messages attempt to direct the partner or assert definitional rights. In essence they are verbal attempts to control the conversational partner. It is of further interest to note that the ratio of husband-to-wife one-up messages, or domineeringness, was considerably greater for aggressive couples. In nonaggressive couples, husbands and wives uttered roughly equal proportions of one-up messages. However, in aggressive couples the proportion of one-up utterances during marital interactions was much greater for husbands than wives. When trying to gain compliance from their spouse, battered wives rely more on submissive or indirect power strategies (e.g., promise, ingratiation) and blatantly aggressive strategies (e.g., threat, warning) compared to non-battered wives (Rudd & Burant, 1995). Rudd and Burant (1995) suggest that this may reflect a pattern whereby battered wives start out with submissive and indirect communication and then escalate it to more aggressive compliance gaining strategies when their initial attempts are not met with success. Sabourin and Stamp (1995) found that the discourse of abusive couples had themes of opposition and interference. Their nonabusive counterparts on the other hand expressed cooperation, mutual facilitation, and interdependence in their talk. Collectively, this research illustrates how aggression is part of a larger constellation of communication behaviors that reflect a struggle for control between spouses. Even when they are not enacting physically violent behaviors this struggle for control is evident in the verbal behavior of aggressive couples.

Husband and Wife Roles in Violent Interactions

Earlier in this chapter we noted that marital violence is not entirely in the domain of husbands. Women married to violent men are often violent themselves. However, husbands and wives enact violence under different interpersonal circumstances. First, women in violent marriages tend to enact violence only in reaction to their husbands' violence, whereas husbands enact violence in response to a much wider variety of wife behaviors, including many that are not violent (Jacobson et al., 1994). Second, Jacobson et al. (1994) also found that husbands' violence appears to be less suppressable than wives' violence. Both husbands and wives in this study of violent marriages indicated that once the husband became violent, there were no wife behaviors that could be performed to stop him, including wife withdrawal. On the other hand, wives were only violent as long as their husbands were behaving violently. This research by Jacobson et al. indicates that despite the fairly high rate of mutual violence in marriages, husbands' violent behaviors clearly follow a different course and trajectory than wives' violent behaviors. In marital interactions husbands' violence is far less contingent on wives' behaviors, but wives' violence is clearly contingent upon ongoing violent husband behavior.

Verbal Aggression

Verbal aggression is a communication behavior that is much more common in violent than nonviolent marriages. In a conflict interaction, there are at least two different ways that spouses might express their disagreement. An *argumentative* response takes issue with the topic or position of the partner's statement. For example, A might say "Let's go out to dinner and a movie tonight." An argumentative response from B might look something like, "I don't think we should, because I don't have a lot of money and we need to get up early tomorrow." This response comments directly on the ideas raised by A. On the other hand a *verbally aggressive* response attacks the self-concept of the partner, causing psychological pain or harm. Following the example above, a verbally aggressive response from B might look like, "How stupid. You must be determined to spend every penny that we have on frivolous activities." This comment does not directly address the issues raised by A, but rather attacks A's self-concept.

Verbally aggressive communication and marital violence appear to go hand in hand (Infante, Sabourin, Rudd, & Shannon, 1990; Meredith et al., 1986; Sabourin, Infante, & Rudd, 1993). Verbal aggression is part of a larger pattern of verbally abusive behaviors that are also associated with physical relationship violence (Byers, Shue, & Marshall, 2004). In addition to sending more verbally aggressive messages to each other than nonviolent couples do, violent couples also have a strong tendency to reciprocate each other's verbal aggression (Burman, John, & Margolin, 1992; Sabourin et al., 1993). This means that violent couples meet verbal aggression with more verbal aggression. Thus, they behave in such a way as to prompt further verbal aggression from each other (Sabourin, 1996). Unfortunately, in many circumstances this verbal aggression escalates into physical violence. This is known by communication researchers as the catalyst hypothesis (Roloff, 1996).

Why is verbally aggressive communication so prevalent in violent marriages, and why does it often escalate into violence? Sabourin (1996) argued that verbal aggression is a necessary but not sufficient condition for physical violence. It can act as a catalyst to physical aggression by increasing the arousal of the person who is verbally attacked (who often responds in kind to the partner). When arousal escalates to a certain threshold, husbands and wives may shift from verbal to physical aggression. This happens because people who use verbal aggression often lack sound argumentation skills (Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989). When some people cannot get their way with words, they resort to physical violence. As noted above, violent couples are much more likely to exhibit verbal aggression than nonviolent couples are. However, what is less intuitive is that violent couples are *lower* in argumentativeness than nonviolent couples (Infante et al., 1989). This suggests that nonviolent couples approach their conflicts with argumentation whereas violent couples attack each other physically and verbally. This pattern has been explained by an argumentation skill deficiency model: People who lack verbal argumentation skills resort to physical violence to establish control in a marriage.

Types of Abusive Spouses

Fitzpatrick (2002) noted that one of the major myths of family violence is that all abusers are alike. People often think of the abusive spouse as a hostile, domineering, male, usually with a drinking problem. Even though this portrayal has some basis in reality, scientific research indicates that there are a number of different types of abusive spouses. In order to fully understand how and why marital violence occurs, it is necessary to examine these different profiles and patterns of spousal abuse.

One basic distinction in abusive male spouses is defined by the contextual pervasiveness of their violent behavior (Holtzworth-Munroe, Meehan, Herron, Rehman, & Stuart, 2003; Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994). These subgroups of batterers are labeled (1) family-only, (2) dysphoric/borderline, and (3) generally violent/antisocial. The *family-only* abuser is a man who limits his violent outbursts to family contexts. Unlike the other two types of

batterers whose behavior is associated with underlying personality disorders, the family-only batterer has specific interpersonal problems in the family to which he reacts with violence. As we discuss elsewhere in this chapter, one such problem may be the perception of powerlessness. Of all the types, the family-only batterer engages in the least severe forms of violence. The *dysphoric/borderline* batterer is marked by impulsiveness, unstable relationships, identity disturbance, mood swings, and boredom. As the title implies, this person suffers from a form of mental illness that causes problems with affect regulation. The third type of batterer, the *generally violent/antisocial*, is an individual who uses violence to resolve conflicts in many different situations. Thus this is a person who is usually violent at work, with friends, and with family members and is the most persistently violent of the various subtypes (Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 2003). Such people are often in conflict with others and the law. Their antisocial personality is such that they feel no remorse for others or guilt over their actions and they are easily frustrated and intolerant of delayed gratification. What is particularly unique about the generally violent batterer is that he does not have interpersonal problems that are unique to the family. Rather, the marriage is merely one context in which his behavior is manifest. For individuals with such pathological tendencies, violence literally becomes a way of life.

A closely related scheme for understanding intimate partner violence has been developed by sociologist Michael Johnson and is based on the motivations of the perpetrator and his or her partner (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). Perhaps the most benign type of partner violence is *common couple violence* in which partners lash out against each other in the context of specific arguments, unconnected to any general pattern of control. Johnson and Ferraro (2000) note that these couples are comparable to Holtzworth-Munroe's "family-only" type. *Intimate terrorism* is a type of partner violence that is motivated primarily by the desire to control one's partner and is perpetrated mostly by men. The intimate terrorists would encompass both the "generally/violent antisocial" and the "dysphoric/borderline" types in Holtzworth-Munroe's taxonomy. *Violent resistance* occurs largely in the service of self-defense and is perpetrated mostly by women. Finally, *mutual violent control* involves both the husband and wife literally battling for control over each other. Johnson observes that such couples might be composed of two intimate terrorists. Johnson's taxonomy of partner violence is valuable not only for distinguishing the motivations that drive different types of violence, but also for revealing powerful sex differences in the perpetration of different patterns of violence.

An interesting and useful taxonomy of male batterers is centered on the heart rate reactivity of the batterer when engaging in marital conflict (Gottman et al., 1995). These researchers discovered two very different types of maritally violent males. In laboratory interactions, *type 1* husbands were found to have a *lower heart rate* upon initiating conflict interactions with their spouses than they did at a resting baseline. On the other hand, *type 2* husbands had an *increased heart rate* when they participated in a conflict interaction. The remarkably different profiles in husbands' physiological arousal were associated with equally remarkable profiles in marital communication behaviors. For example, type 1 (lowered heart rate) husbands showed more emotional aggression (i.e., contempt and belligerence) during marital interactions than type 2 (increased heart rate) husbands. However, type 1 husbands became less aggressive over time, whereas the type 2 husbands became more aggressive with their wives over the course of an interaction (but never to the level that type 1 husbands started out). Wives of the type 1 husbands were less angry and more defensive and sad in the interactions than wives of type 2 husbands. Outside of the laboratory interactions, there were several other notable distinctions between these different types of violent husbands. Type 1 batterers had higher rates of antisocial and aggressive-sadistic personality disorder than type 2 batterers. Perhaps it is therefore no surprise to learn that type 1 batterers were more likely to threaten to use a knife or gun, and actually use a knife or gun, and to kick, hit, or slap their wives than type 2 batterers (Jacobson, Gottman, Shortt, 1995). At a two-year follow up, 27% of the type 2 marriages had broken up, versus 0% of the type 1 marriages. There were also obvious differences in the pervasiveness of their violence: 44% of the type 1 husbands had been violent toward others, whereas only 3%

of the type 2 husbands were violent outside of their marriage. A brief glimpse of the potential origins of type 1 batterers is evident in their history of observing parental violence: 46% of the type 1 men were exposed to parental violence (father → mother and mother → father) compared to only 11% of the type 2 men.

The Gottman et al. (1995) investigation paints two very different pictures of male batterers. The type 1 husband approaches marital interactions with severe violence, yet shows reduced arousal suggestive of cool detachment. The type 2 husband gets physiologically aroused by marital confrontations and his aggression builds over the course of the interaction. This second type of batterer is far less likely than that first to be involved in violence outside of the family or to have serious personality disorders. Afterwards, Jacobson and Gottman (1998) expanded on this typology, characterizing the two types of abusive husbands as “cobras” and “pit bulls.” The cobra strikes quickly and is cool and methodical. Its aggression is lethal. The pit bull on the other hand gets worked up over the course of an interaction and strikes out in anger in the heat of the moment. Even though the consequences of being married to either type of batterer are potentially severe, the propensity for extreme violence, disordered personality, and greater involvement in substance abuse that characterizes the type 1 batterer makes him a particularly dangerous spouse. Perhaps the fear that would be readily generated by such an individual helps to explain why none of the type 1 marriages in the Jacobson et al. (1995) study ended in divorce.

In chapter 2 we explained how attachment theory predicts a connection between early experiences with a primary caregiver and subsequent interpersonal relationships. One of the more interesting applications of attachment theory in family relationships has been to different types of violent spouses. It appears that violent spouses have different adult attachment styles than nonviolent spouses, and that among violent spouses there are subtypes that can be distinguished by their attachment orientation (Babcock, Jacobson, Gottman, & Yerington, 2000). Babcock et al. found that distressed but not violent husbands predominantly had a secure attachment style whereas distressed and violent husbands had an insecure attachment style. Among these insecurely attached violent husbands were two subtypes with distinct interpersonal tendencies. Those whose attachment style was *preoccupied* engaged in mostly expressive violence (i.e., violence aimed at reducing negative affect). On the other hand, violent husbands with a *dismissing* attachment style showed more instrumental violence (i.e., violence aimed at achieving a specific goal). Babcock et al. theorize that the dismissive violent husbands use violence to thwart perceived threats to their authority. They were much more likely to exhibit stonewalling during a marital conflict interaction than preoccupied husbands, and their wives were more likely to be defensive in these interactions. Alternatively, preoccupied husbands seem to become violent and abusive when their wives attempt to withdraw. This may trigger increased arousal due to perceived threats of abandonment. Essentially, these two types of violent husbands, defined by their attachment style, differ in the extent to which they use violence to control their wives (the dismissing) versus regulate their negative emotions (preoccupied).

Just as attachment styles appear to predict perpetration of intimate partner violence, attachment styles also appear related to risk of victimization (Bond & Bond, 2004). Specifically, people with insecure attachment styles (anxious and dismissing) are more likely to be victims of relationship violence than those with a secure attachment style. Bond and Bond (2004) found that females with anxious attachment styles and males with dismissing attachment styles were both at elevated risk for victimization, and this was especially pronounced if either also had poor problem solving and communication skills.

Spousal Abuse and Patriarchal Social Structure

Among some of the other theoretical explanations of intimate partner violence already presented in this chapter is an explanation developed by feminist theorists based on the uneven

distribution of power between males and females (e.g., Dobash & Dobash, 1979). The idea behind this perspective is that society is set up to support a patriarchal or male-dominated social structure. This social structure is thought to support the subordination of women and contribute to a pattern of violence perpetrated by men against women. In a patriarchal society, violence against women would be viewed as acceptable, and male perpetrators would not be punished because of their power and standing in society.

Even though the patriarchal theory is a bit more macroscopic, by virtue of its focus on societal issues, than most of the theoretical explanations that we consider in this chapter, it is important to understand for several reasons. First, all relationships within and between the sexes are embedded in a larger societal structure. It is impossible to deny that at least historically males and females have not had equal status and authority in American society. These more abstract power differences surely seeped into some close relationships and perhaps manifested themselves in physically aggressive behavior. Second, the patriarchal theory represents something of an unresolved dilemma for social scientists. On one hand, the power, status, and roles of men and women are not the same in our society. However, the validity of this argument as an explanation for intimate partner violence is challenged by data indicating comparable rates of female → male and male → female partner violence (Tolan, Gorman-Smith, & Henry, 2006). Most cases of intimate partner violence involve mutual violence (Anderson, 2002). Of course, one obvious rebuttal would be that these statistics fail to capture the context of these two patterns of violence where men are more likely to use violence to aggress and women are more likely to use violence to defend. In addition, the negative consequences of intimate partner violence are more severe for women than men (Anderson, 2002). Perhaps a more strenuous challenge to the patriarchal explanation comes from data showing high rates of partner violence in gay and lesbian relationships. Later in this chapter we discuss these findings in more detail, but for the time being, it should be clear that if gender-based power differentials are behind most cases of intimate partner violence, then these acts should be rare in same-sex relationships. However, this is not the case.

The Intergenerational Transmission of Spouse Abuse

Earlier in this chapter we mentioned that one of the popular theories of child abuse, and family violence more generally, is the intergenerational transmission theory. According to this theory, children who observe violence between their parents are likely to enact similar behaviors later in life when they are married. This perspective draws heavily on social learning theory (see chapter 2) and assumes that the repeated observation of parental violence teaches the child that violence is a family norm and that the modeled behavior is an appropriate means for addressing problems. A meta-analysis of 39 research studies involving 12,981 participants showed that there is a small but significant positive association between growing up in a violent home and perpetrating spousal abuse (Smith et al., 2000). Smith et al. also found that this modeling effect was stronger for males than females. In other words, males who grew up in a violent home were more likely to be abusive toward their spouses than females who grew up in a violent home. However, there also appears to be an effect for being a victim of spousal abuse, and this is stronger for females. Exposure to parental violence also puts people, especially females, at higher risk for becoming victims of spousal abuse later in life.

When children grow up witnessing violence between spouses they tend to develop emotional and behavioral problems (Wolfe, Crooks, Lee, McIntyre-Smith, & Jaffe, 2003) along with positive attitudes toward marital violence (Markowitz, 2001). The favorable attitudes, in turn, are positively associated with the use of violence in adulthood against both spouses and children. Markowitz (2001) noted, “By watching parents hit each other and by being hit themselves, children come to learn that violence is an appropriate means of conflict resolution, enacted in their later marital relationships” (p. 216). What is particularly interesting about this intergenerational behavioral effect is that it is largely mediated by

favorable attitudes toward family violence. In other words, the favorable attitudes account for the relationship between modeled violence in the family of origin and later violence in the family of orientation. One important practical implication of this finding is that attempts to control spousal violence should be focused on changing attitudes about the appropriateness of this conduct.

The impact of parental violence on children's mental representations of family interaction is evident very early in childhood (Grych, Wachsmuth-Shlaefer, & Klockow, 2002). Grych et al. (2002) studied 3½ to 7 year old children from homes with and without marital violence. The children were given a series of fictitious family scenarios such as disagreeing about what to have for dinner and how to punish a child for accidentally breaking a lamp. The children were then asked to complete the story in their own words and with the actions of dolls that they could manipulate. The discourse of children from homes with marital violence suggested greater conflict escalation than that of children from nonviolent homes. In other words, it appears that as children witness interparental violence, they tend to normalize the phenomenon and anticipate that small conflicts will grow into larger conflicts and go unresolved. Grych et al. (2002) interpret these children's stories as reflective of an already developing schema for the dysfunctional course and outcome of family disagreements.

Finally, the interpersonal implications of violence modeled in the family of origin are evident even before young adults marry. Engaged couples in which the male partner witnessed parental violence already show more negative and dysfunctional conflict management behaviors than those who were not exposed to parental violence (Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2000). These researchers videotaped couples discussing an issue that was a point of contention in their relationship. Analysis of these interactions revealed more invalidation, negative nonverbal behavior, withdrawal, and conflict for the couples in which the male was exposed to family of origin violence compared to those where there was no exposure to such violence. These findings show that many of the precursors to potentially violent marital encounters are already apparent in couples with a history of exposure to violent marital interactions in their families of origin.

The Association between Marital Violence and Physical Child Abuse

There is good reason to believe that violence becomes a system-wide problem for some families. That is to say that violence between husbands and wives is associated with violence between parents and children (Tolan et al., 2006). An anonymous survey study conducted by Meredith et al. (1986) found a significant positive association between parents' reports of physical violence toward their spouse and toward their children (see also Tajima, 2002). In a clever laboratory study, Margolin, John, Ghosh, and Gordis (1996) observed parents interacting with their children while engaging in a cooperative task. In this study parents and children had to copy a line drawing by using an Etch-A-Sketch toy, where one person controlled the vertical line drawing knob and the other controlled the horizontal line drawing knob. To draw curves or circles, the parent and child had to cooperate very carefully. Margolin et al. (1996) found that fathers'/husbands' tendencies to engage in physical aggression toward their wives were positively associated with authoritarian behaviors, negative affect, and controlling behaviors, and negatively associated with authoritative (democratic) behaviors during laboratory interactions. The authors concluded that "more extreme forms of marital aggression appear to coexist with less extreme but potentially salient behavior patterns regarding how parents treat each other, how they treat the child, and how the child behaves when both the parent and child are present" (Margolin et al., 1996, p. 57). In a related investigation, young expectant parents engaged in a 10-minute laboratory conflict resolution task and were then followed up 2 years later, after the child was born, for observation of a family play activity (Moore & Florsheim, 2008). Interpartner violence and hostility before the child was born predicted more physically punitive and hostile behaviors by the father, directed at the

young child. Such findings provide a compelling illustration of the fact that family members with a propensity to be abusive will often enact such behaviors in multiple relational contexts.

It is evident that virtually all of the risk factors associated with partner abuse (e.g., age, race, income, poverty level, family size, social isolation, verbal aggression, etc.) are also risk factors for child abuse (Slep & O'Leary, 2001). As we discussed earlier in this chapter, in some cases marital violence is part of a larger constellation of violent behavior. In at least some cases it is clear that children are a part of that constellation, making marital violence an obvious marker of risk for child abuse.

It is not entirely surprising that people who physically abuse their spouses are also more inclined to abuse their children. However, it is now apparent that the association between marital violence and physical child abuse can span generations. Childhood exposure to either interparental violence or parent → child violence significantly increases the risk for contemporary adult partner violence and parent → child abuse (Heyman & Slep, 2002). It appears as if early childhood experience with family violence, be it direct (i.e., child abuse) or vicarious (i.e., observing interparental violence), contributes to a propensity to enact family violence later in life. This intergenerational transmission or “cycle of violence” may be the result of such children growing up with the belief that family violence is normative and appropriate.

Violence in Gay and Lesbian Relationships

Intimate partner violence is not a phenomenon that is restricted to male–female relationships. Current scientific evidence indicates that domestic violence occurs as frequently, if not more often, in gay and lesbian partnerships as it does in heterosexual cohabitating relationships and marriages. Tabulating an exact rate of violence in gay and lesbian relationships has proven to be a difficult chore for researchers. There are often substantial differences from study to study in estimates of domestic violence in gay and lesbian relationships. This variation may be the result of different samples that are often smaller than those on which marital violence rates are assessed. Gay men in particular may be uncomfortable admitting that they have been victimized because it is inconsistent with their male identity, so they may underreport experiences with partner violence (Letellier, 1994). Reporting violence in lesbian couples is also inconsistent with the idea of women as less violent than men (Burke & Follingstad, 1999), so it too may tend to be underreported.

Estimates of partner violence rates in lesbian relationships range from 30% (Brand & Kidd, 1986; Lie & Gentlewarrior, 1991) to as high as 75% (Lie, Schilit, Bush, Montagne, & Reyes, 1991). More recently, Waldner-Haugrud, Gratch, and Magruder (1997) found 47.5% of the lesbians that they surveyed had experienced relationship violence, most commonly involving behaviors such as pushing, slapping, and punching. An explicit comparison of relationship violence in lesbian and heterosexual women indicated that a higher percentage of lesbians (40%) than heterosexual women (31%) had physical violence perpetrated against them by an intimate partner (Bernhard, 2000). However, rates of sexual violence victimization were comparable for lesbian and heterosexual women, at 24% and 23% respectively. Regardless of the precise estimate, it is clear that intimate partner violence is at least as prevalent in lesbian relationships as it is in heterosexual relationships (West, 2002).

Relationship violence also appears to be common in gay male relationships. In their survey, Waldner-Haugrud et al. (1997) discovered that approximately 30% of gay males had experienced partner violence. This is comparable to the 38% physical abuse rate in gay relationships reported by Gardner (1989). As in intimate partner relationships more generally, research shows that witnessing violence between parents, or being the recipient of abusive behavior from parents when living in the family of origin, increases the risk of gay men perpetrating or being the recipient of intimate partner violence (Craft & Serovich, 2005). Some researchers have pointed out that the domestic violence movement has historically focused on the

battering of women, particularly heterosexual women, resulting in virtually no attention being paid the problem of battery in gay male relationships (Letellier, 1994). For that reason, awareness and understanding of violence in gay male relationships has lagged behind that of heterosexual, and to a lesser extent lesbian, relationships.

Burke and Follingstad (1999) concluded a review of the literature on violence in gay and lesbian relationships by noting that “lesbians and gay men are just as likely to abuse their partners as heterosexual men” (p. 508). This fact presents a strenuous challenge to the doctrine of male to female aggression that is embraced by feminist theories of domestic violence. If the root of intimate partner violence is a patriarchal social structure that tolerates, if not condones, the victimization of women by their male partners, then interpersonal violence should be a relatively rare phenomenon in lesbian and gay relationships. As shown above, however, this is clearly not the case. For this reason, research findings on violence in gay and lesbian relationships have particular scientific importance for evaluating theories based on power structures and gender roles. For example, psychologist Vallerie Coleman (1994) plainly argued that “gender-based sociopolitical theories of domestic violence cannot adequately explain why lesbian battering occurs at rates comparable to that of heterosexual battering” (p. 150). Theorists tend to agree that violence in these relationships is an issue of establishing and maintaining power, but that this power is not derived from sex or gender roles as some have assumed to be the case in heterosexual couples (Letellier, 1994; Waldner-Haugrud et al., 1997). Waldner-Haugrud and her colleagues suggest that power in lesbian relationships may come from physical size, attractiveness, and economic or job status.

The research findings on violence in lesbian and gay male couples, along with those on heterosexual marriages, suggest that people use physical aggression to establish power and control their partner. Feeling powerless or otherwise unable to control the partner seems to be a more universal antecedent to intimate partner violence than simply being male. Research on violence in gay and lesbian relationships also indicates that power has its basis in a number of factors aside from one’s biological sex.

ELDER ABUSE

Of all the types of abuse perpetrated against family members, elder abuse is clearly the least studied and, consequently, is not particularly well understood. Nevertheless, what is known about elder abuse indicates that it is more common than some people may wish to think and takes on many forms. The World Health Organization defines elder abuse as “a single or repeated act or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person” (World Health Organization, 2002, p. 126). Some of the most commonly identified forms of elder abuse include physical abuse, emotional abuse, verbal abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, and financial abuse/exploitation (e.g., theft of money or possessions, use of fraud to take money or possessions). Three recent epidemiological studies provide, for the first time, sound estimates of the prevalence of elder abuse. In the U.S., the National Elder Mistreatment Study indicates a 1-year prevalence rate of 4.6% for emotional abuse, 1.6% for physical abuse, 5.1% for neglect, and 5.2% for financial abuse of elders (Aciemo et al., 2010). Data from the National Social Life, Health and Aging Project indicated 1-year prevalence rates of 9% for verbal abuse, 0.2% for physical abuse, and 3.5% for financial abuse of the elderly (Laumann, Leitsch, & Waite, 2008). The UK National Prevalence Study of Elder Mistreatment indicates somewhat lower rates than in the U.S., with 1-year prevalence rates at 1.1% for neglect, 0.4% for physical abuse, 0.4% for psychological abuse, and 0.6% for financial abuse (Biggs, Manthorpe, Tinker, Doyle, & Erens, 2009).

What is perhaps most troubling to family scientists is the relationship between those who perpetrate elder abuse and their victims. Findings from the National Social Life, Health and

Aging Project indicate that about half of all cases of elder abuse are perpetrated by family members, especially spouses and children (Laumann et al., 2008; see also Lundy & Grossman, 2004). In the UK national prevalence study cited earlier, about 90% of the cases of interpersonal abuse or neglect of the elderly were carried out by a spouse or other family member (Biggs et al., 2009).

Why do people enact abusive behaviors toward their elderly family members? Theories of elder abuse tend to resemble those that have been employed to understand other forms of abuse. This suggests that in many cases, elder abuse might be the result of some of the same family dynamics that give rise to other forms of abuse and violence in the family. This is vividly illustrated in findings showing that many cases of elder abuse represent continuity from spousal abuse as people age (Lundy & Grossman, 2004). In other words, abused spouses often end up becoming abused elderly as they age and remain in the same relationship with the partner who has abused them in the past.

Many attempts to understand elder abuse appeal to *social learning theory* (e.g., Walsh et al., 2007) (see chapter 2). What has been variously termed the “cycle of violence” or “intergenerational transmission of abuse” is the phenomenon of people who are abused as youngsters going on to abuse others (e.g., their children or parents) as they grow older (Kosberg & MacNeil, 2003; Walsh et al., 2007). Many elderly people are abused by family members who have been abused themselves, evidently in a family climate that normalizes violence and/or neglect and teaches impressionable children that this is acceptable conduct. Another theoretical explanation that is coalescing in the literature could be characterized as a *vulnerability model*. Many elderly who are abused have low social support and special needs such as health or psychological problems (Aciamo et al., 2010; Lundy & Grossman, 2004). These problems make them especially prone to being victimized and exploited by others, often without recourse. Giles and Helmle (2010) modified the classic caregiver stress model to propose a *dependent victim-caregiver stress model*. According to this view, elder abuse occurs when a physically and emotionally dependent elderly person is in a relationship with a strained caregiver who is undergoing a number of life stressors in addition to having to care for the elderly family member. To the extent that caregivers are distressed and psychologically burdened they are at much higher risk for committing elder abuse (Cooper et al., 2010). Giles and Helmle further argue that the communication for some elderly people, specifically behaviors such as complaining, being antagonistic, and not listening, can create a dissatisfying intergenerational communication climate for younger adults, presumably adding to the stress of providing care. At times elderly family members can act downright abusive toward their caregivers, and this too increases the risk of elder abuse (Cooper et al., 2010).

The ABC-X model of family stress (see chapter 10) was slightly revised to successfully explain abuse of elders by family caregivers (Lee, 2009). In Lee’s (2009) revision of the ABC-X model, the elderly person’s physical impairments, cognitive impairments, and problematic behaviors (e.g., being disruptive) are conceptualized as family stressors (A). As in the original ABC-X model, network social support is conceptualized as an important family resource (B). The caregiver’s burden is the perception, or (C) factor. Collectively, the stressors and family resources appear to predict the perception, which in turn predicts the crisis (X), which in this case is measured as impulsive feelings to commit elder abuse. Lee’s adaptation of the ABC-X model appears in Figure 16.4.

CONCLUSION

Family violence can take a variety of forms, but all can be conceptualized as dysfunctional and destructive communication between family members. Some of the same family environments that give rise to one type of family violence (e.g., physical child abuse) are also associated with other forms (e.g., marital violence). In most cases, family violence is not just contained to the

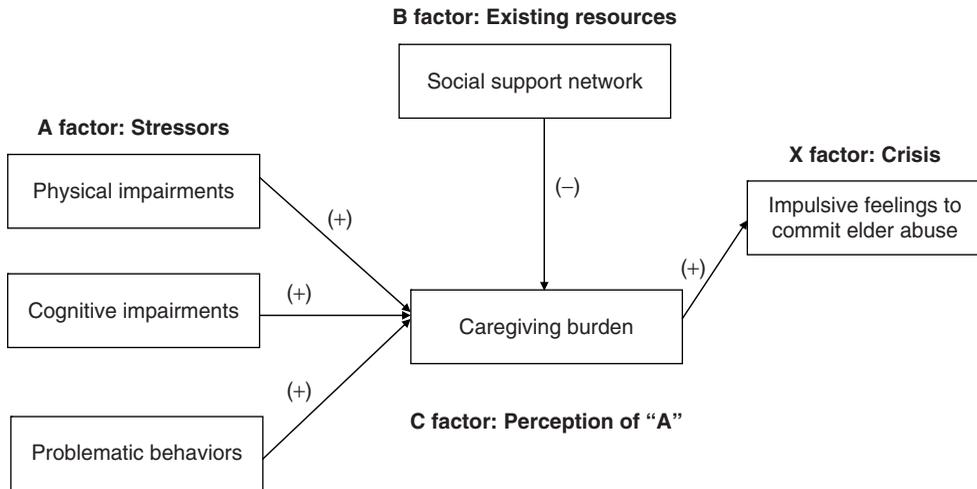


Figure 16.4 Lee's (2009) model of elder abuse.

From Lee, M. (2009). A path analysis on elder abuse by family caregivers: Applying the ABCX Model. *Journal of Family Violence*, 24, 1–9. Published by Springer. Reprinted with permission.

nonverbal communication behaviors that define violence, such as hitting a family member. The verbal behaviors of family members are additionally suggestive of conflict, tension, interference, negativity, and particularly in the case of marital violence, a struggle for control. The dynamics of families that abuse their children are marked by poor cohesion and adaptability (i.e., “affectionless control”), poor boundary regulation, and absent or ineffective parenting. Child abuse has devastating psychological and interpersonal effects on children both while they are young as well as later in life when they are at heightened risk for abusing their own children. In the marital context, violence is often perpetrated by people with poor argumentation skills. The powerlessness hypothesis explains that spouses will often enact violent behaviors in a misguided effort to establish some control in their relationship and over their partner. In fact, many of the nonverbal and verbal communication behaviors enacted by such people are in the service of attaining some degree of power over other family members, whether it is a parent disciplining a child or a spouse arguing with his or her partner.

Family violence and abuse represent some of the darkest elements of family communication. In American society, families are often revered for being the crucible of socialization, imparting values and morals, and turning out productive members of society. The research on family violence and abuse is a reminder that this same social institution can be the site of horrific maltreatment of children, spouses, and elderly family members. Sadly, people who are abused, or who witness abuse, often go on to abuse others. Breaking this “cycle of violence” in the family remains as one of the great challenges in our society today.

17 Improving Family Communication and Family Relationships

During the lifespan of most marriages and families there will be times when family members are not communicating effectively with each other. Consider for example a husband and wife who slowly grow distant from each other after years of marriage and begin to simply exclude each other from their day to day activities. Sometimes parents have a hard time getting through to their children, especially when those children reach adolescence. For example, an adolescent child might start wearing “strange” clothes, listening to rebellious music, and associating more with friends and less with family. Parents of such children often try many different tactics to maintain contact with and control of their child, often to no avail. Earlier in this book we examined research findings showing that some of the ingredients for eventual marital distress are already evident in the communication behaviors of premarital couples. Some couples progress with wedding plans despite the incidence of domestic violence in their relationship. Is there any hope or help for such families and couples?

In this chapter, we will try to answer a number of key questions about the possibility of improving family communication. Because there is no such thing as a “perfect” family, it is assumed that virtually everyone can benefit from efforts to improve family communication. But can families actually improve their communication and relationships? If so, how is this achieved? Are efforts to improve family communication only for distressed families who seek therapy? Is there anything that can be done to help couples who are planning to marry so that their communication patterns do not lead them down the road to divorce? Can communication training help parents do a better job of raising their children? These are just some of the issues that are explored in this chapter as we review examples of the more organized and documented techniques and programs to improve family communication.

In this chapter we examine programs for improving family relationships and interactions. These efforts cover an interesting range of activities such as premarital counseling, parent training, and family therapy. A theme that is common to most of these efforts is improvement of family communication patterns. It seems as if family communication is viewed, at least implicitly, as either the cause of some family problems or their remedy. For example, interviews with 50 couples’ counselors revealed that many clients seek their services for what are essentially communication problems (Vangelisti, 1994b). These therapists and counselors indicated that the most common communication problems presented by couples seeking help are blaming the partner for negative events, not taking the partner’s perspective when listening, and criticizing or putting the partner down. Not surprisingly, many of the programs that are intended to improve marital relationships through either premarital counseling or marital enrichment are essentially social skills training programs that teach basic and effective interpersonal communication techniques (Segrin & Givertz, 2003).

Before looking at some of the programs and treatments for improving family communication, we want to highlight an important practical issue. Improving family communication is possible but not easy. People often learn skills such as driving a car, playing a musical

instrument, or working with tools under careful supervision and with the best of intentions. Eventually, however, bad habits often develop. During courtship people tend to be on their best interpersonal behavior. Parents of newborn children typically put great care and thought into their interactions with the child. Nevertheless, like sands that are slowly washed away by time and tide, these family interaction skills sometimes erode and get replaced by less functional interaction patterns. It is clear that efforts to improve family relationships and communication are most effective when they are pursued before real troubles start. The old saying, “a stitch in time saves nine” applies here. It is much more feasible to teach premarital couples the skills they need to maintain a happy and healthy relationship than it is to repair a marriage badly damaged by years of criticism, accusation, and disintegrated trust. Even when distressed couples undergo carefully designed and implemented therapy to enhance their communication and problem-solving skills, relapsing back to a state of distress is a common problem (Kelly, Fincham, & Beach, 2003). Well-established habits, even when they are distressing and dysfunctional, are not easily and permanently replaced. For these reasons, attempts to improve family relations and interaction are most likely to be successful when they start early.

The family scholar Luciano L’Abate (1990) characterized efforts to improve family communication and relationships as different types of prevention efforts. According to L’Abate, prevention implies “any approach, procedure, or method intended and designed to improve one’s interpersonal competence as an individual, as a partner, and as a parent” (p. 20). From this perspective, prevention strategies could be understood as efforts to prevent family dysfunction by trying to improve the interpersonal competence of family members. L’Abate (1990) further delineates prevention strategies into three major categories (see also Caplan, 1964; Segrin, 2008).

Primary prevention involves taking steps to reduce the likelihood of experiencing distress in the family by promoting conditions that enhance the interpersonal competence and coping skills of family members. Primary prevention strategies are applied to well-functioning couples and families with the hope that they will stay that way. Often, primary prevention strategies are largely educational in nature, as we will see in upcoming sections of this chapter. A major emphasis for primary prevention has been marriage preparation.

Secondary prevention entails early identification of potentially “at-risk” family members and the application of training or treatment before any serious dysfunction develops. For example, married couples with newly born children are at risk of experiencing declines in marital satisfaction and families with low incomes that live in high stress neighborhoods are at risk for problems such as drug and alcohol abuse. A secondary prevention strategy would attempt to identify these at-risk, but still functional, families and offer some sort of intervention before any major difficulties could develop. Sometimes the distinction between primary and secondary prevention is a little blurry. As L’Abate (1990) notes, the distinction lies in how one defines “risk” and “need.” Later in this chapter we discuss a series of secondary prevention programs designed to help couples enhance and maintain marital satisfaction and to help parents effectively raise their children. Although some might characterize these methods as primary prevention strategies, the underlying philosophies of these programs suggest that the people in these various family roles (or their children) are at some risk for potential problems.

Finally, *tertiary prevention* involves crisis-oriented therapeutic activities and interventions. These are delivered to distressed individuals and families, usually by highly trained professionals. Tertiary prevention is administered after dysfunction and breakdown occur. It is unfortunately the most common of the three prevention strategies, but comes largely after the damage is done. Common examples include couples therapy and family therapy for children with emotional or behavioral problems. Bradbury and Fincham (1990) paraphrase L’Abate’s classification of primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention as “before it happens, before it gets worse, and before it is too late” (p. 376).

Table 17.1 Examples of programs and techniques to improve family relationships

| <i>Prevention Philosophy</i> | <i>Program</i> | <i>Goal</i> | <i>Target Population</i> |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| Primary | PREP | Teach communication skills, explore cognitions, enhance relational bond | Couples planning to marry |
| | PREPARE | Assess background and functioning of relationship, provide information to couples about their similarities & differences | Couples planning to marry |
| Secondary | Marriage Encounter | Encourage couple dialogue and self-disclosure, explore spirituality/faith | Married couples |
| | Couples Communication Program | Create self- and other-awareness, teach communication skills | Married couples |
| | STEP | Understand goals of child misbehavior, teach effective techniques for managing child behavior | Parents of young children–adolescents |
| | Behavioral parent training | Teach effective techniques for managing child behavior problems | Parents |
| Tertiary | Cognitive behavioral family therapy | Treat clinical family dysfunction and behavior problems | Distressed couples and families |
| | Structural family therapy | Adjust family structure and norms of interaction to adapt to changes | Distressed couples and families |

In the remainder of this chapter we will discuss a number of different programs, approaches, and therapies aimed at enhancing family relationships and the communication that goes on between family members. We have organized these techniques according to L'Abate's (1990) scheme of primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention. A quick summary of these different programs and techniques is presented in Table 17.1. This review and analysis will show that many people have tried many different methods of improving family competence. However, there are some remarkable commonalities in these different programs. One of the most notable is a focus on effective communication skills. The majority of approaches to improving family relations focus, at least to some extent, on how the family members communicate with each other.

PRIMARY PREVENTION STRATEGIES

Primary prevention programs have received substantial attention in the family science literature, and with good reason. As we discussed in chapter 12, about half of all marriages initiated in recent years are predicted to end in divorce. Divorce has obvious and profound implications for the psychological, physical, social, and economic well-being of the spouses, and further implications for their children and extended family. It is no wonder that so much effort has been put into marriage preparation programs aimed at preventing or minimizing the development of marital distress and enhancing marital stability (Fraenkel, Markman, & Stanley, 1997; Silliman & Schumm, 2000; Stahmann, 2000).

As we noted earlier in this chapter, most of the primary prevention programs are educational in nature. Because these programs are for healthy, functional people, there is no "treatment" or "therapy" provided. Many of these programs fit into the larger "family life education" movement that is aimed at providing people with information and skills for dealing with the stressors and challenges that face all families (Arcus, 1995).

Primary prevention programs started from rather meager beginnings. It is apparent that practitioners have struggled to produce and offer programs that people will get involved in and to create programs that really work. Early marriage preparation programs were based largely on the conjecture of the program developers, were rarely rooted in any theory of marital success or failure, and had hardly any empirical evidence to suggest that they were effective (Bagarozzi & Rauen, 1981). More recently, Sullivan and Bradbury (1997) found the people who are most likely to participate in marital preparation programs are the ones who need it the least. Couples at high risk for eventual marital distress and dissolution do not seem to be interested in participating in such programs. Fewer than 50% of all couples marrying for the first time actually participate in any formalized marriage preparation or premarital counseling (Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006). Among those who do participate in marriage preparation programs, future marital outcomes are not necessarily any better than those who do not participate (Sullivan & Bradbury, 1997). Despite guarded evidence for the effectiveness of prevention programs, such programs might have certain subtle benefits that are not immediately obvious. For example, a large study of people in the U.S. Army revealed that premarital counseling had no effect on couples' eventual satisfaction or distress (Schumm, Silliman, & Bell, 2000). However, those who had participated in premarital counseling were more likely (24%) to seek marital and family therapy, than those who had not (8%). So, even if premarital counseling has no lasting effects on marital quality, at least it appears to motivate people to seek professional help when their marriage is in trouble.

One other positive thing about marriage preparation programs is that most people who participate in them appear to be satisfied with the experience (Williams, Riley, Risch, & Van Dyke, 1999). When asked what they liked the most or what was most helpful about marriage preparation and premarital counseling, couples cite communication skills training, conflict and problem solving, and discussing family of origin issues (Lyster, Russell, & Heibert, 1995; Valiente, Belanger, & Estrada, 2002; Williams et al., 1999). Because a focus on such communication skills is a part of most programs and is supported by good scientific evidence (Kelly & Fincham, 1999), it is understandable that participants are generally satisfied with their formal marriage preparation experiences.

In the upcoming pages, we will examine in some detail the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) and briefly consider the PREPARE, Relationship Enhancement, and Marital Assessment and Preparation marriage preparation programs. We selected these programs for their prominence in the family science literature, their popularity, and their historical significance. It is important to understand that these are but a mere fraction of all the marriage preparation programs in existence. There are surely hundreds of different programs, many of which are local in nature and designed and implemented by a single individual, based perhaps only on hunches about what makes a marriage work. The effectiveness of such programs may never be understood because of their lack of empirical evaluation. However, the programs presented next illustrate the thinking and planning that went into some of the better designed and more nationally available marriage preparation programs.

Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP)

Description

Amidst a bewildering array of marital preparation programs, the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP; Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Jamieson, 1984; Stanley, Blumberg, & Markman, 1999; Stanley, Markman, St. Peters, & Leber, 1995; Renick, Blumberg, & Markman, 1992) stands out for being empirically based and empirically evaluated. In other words, the people who developed PREP based the program on knowledge acquired through empirical research. Those phenomena that have been shown to predict marital satisfaction and

stability (or deterioration) are the major issues addressed in PREP. Similarly, the effectiveness of PREP has been carefully tested through numerous scientific studies.

PREP is a primary prevention program. It was originally designed for couples contemplating marriage with the goal of preventing marital problems before they have a chance to negatively affect the relationship. The program incorporates many of the principles of behavioral couples' therapy as well as cognitive behavioral therapy (Markman, Stanley, Jenkins, Petrella, & Wadsworth, 2006) by assuming that couples can learn behaviors that will help to prevent the deterioration of marital satisfaction. There are four primary goals to PREP: (1) teaching good communication skills, (2) clarifying and evaluating expectations for marriage, (3) creating an understanding about choices and commitment to the relationship, and (4) enhancing the couple's bond through fun, friendship, and sensuality (Stanley et al., 1999). The program has been expanded to also include in depth coverage of topics such as friendship and positive connection, commitment, and forgiveness (Markman et al., 2004).

PREP is delivered in a group format, usually with 4 to 40 couples, over a 12 hour period. This might happen over a single weekend or six 2-hour sessions. In either case, couples attend a series of lectures on topics such as conflict management, expectations, and commitment. These lectures often include demonstrations or modeling. Shortly thereafter, couples practice, discuss, and apply the skills and concepts that were covered in the lecture. Communication is a major focus of this program. Couples are introduced to the "intent = impact" model of effective communication (Gottman, Notarius, Gonso, & Markman, 1976), which stresses the importance of clearly sending messages so that the impact on the listener matches the intention of the speaker. Couples are also taught skills for effective speaking and listening, editing destructive feelings when conversing, awareness of hidden agendas in marital interactions, and negotiating differences. One specific communication technique that is taught is the "Speaker-Listener Technique" in which the couples use an object to clearly identify who has the floor (the speaker) and who is the listener. After the speaker expresses a point, the listener is taught to paraphrase what he or she hears so that both can be sure that they are on the same page.

Evaluation

As noted earlier, the effectiveness of PREP has been extensively evaluated through carefully designed studies. So how well does it work? Couples who participate in PREP generally show increased positive communication and decreased negative communication relative to those in a control condition, immediately following participation in the program (Stanley et al., 2001). The elements of the program that focus on communication appear to be clear favorites among the participants. At least in the short run, PREP appears to have a bigger impact on changes in positive and negative communication behaviors than on relational satisfaction (Laurenceau, Stanley, Olmos-Gallo, Baucom, & Markman, 2004). When followed up over longer periods of time (1–5 years), couples that have been through PREP show higher relational satisfaction, fewer sexual difficulties, and fewer instances of physical violence than couples in a control condition (Markman et al., 1993; Renick et al., 1992). PREP couples appear to maintain many of the positive communication skills that they learn for at least 5 years beyond the program (Markman et al., 1993). A version of PREP designed for couples in Germany (EPL; Hahlweg, Markman, Thurmaier, Engl, & Eckert, 1998; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993) has similar documented effectiveness. At a 3-year follow-up, couples in the German version of PREP exhibited more positive (e.g., self-disclosure, acceptance of partner, agreement) and less negative (e.g., criticism, disagreement) communication behaviors during a 10-minute problem solving interaction than couples in a control group (Hahlweg et al., 1998). Also, 3 years after the program, satisfaction of the PREP couples was higher and their dissolution rate was lower (9.4% vs. 21.9%) than couples in a control group. An 11-year follow-up of participants in the German version of PREP (EPL) had a 27.5% divorce rate compared to a 52.6% rate for a

group of non-EPL participants (Hahlweg & Richter, 2010). Couples who participate in PREP tend to be very satisfied with the experience. In one large-scale evaluation of PREP, 85% of the respondents indicated that they were “quite satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the program (Thuen & Laerum, 2005).

It has recently come to light that the communication skills taught in PREP may have a different impact on marital outcomes for men and women (Schilling, Baucom, Burnett, Allen, & Ragland, 2003). Schilling and her associates found that people who participated in PREP indeed increased their positive communication (e.g., support-validation, expressing positive affect) and decreased their negative communication (e.g., conflict, denial) with their partner. To the extent that men increased their positive communication skills by participating in PREP, they were at decreased risk for marital distress over the following 5 years. However, for women it was the exact opposite. Their increases in positive communication were associated with an increased likelihood that the couple would experience marital distress in future years. Schilling and her associates conjecture that for women positive communication might include withholding concerns and complaints from the partner. In so doing, these issues could fail to get resolved. They found comparable results for negative communication: When men decreased their negative communication following PREP, they were at lower risk for later marital distress, but women’s decreases in negative communication were unrelated to their subsequent marital distress. Although PREP appears quite effective for males, to the extent that it implicitly and inadvertently teaches females to hold off on expressing their grievances, it could have unintended negative effects on wives’ subsequent marital satisfaction. This seemingly ill effect of increased positive communication skills in women was more recently replicated in a study of German couples participating in PREP (Baucom, Hahlweg, Atkins, Engl, & Thurmaier, 2006) but appears to apply only to a small subset of women. However, a similar investigation of couples participating in PREP found no association between increases in female positive communication and increased risk for later marital distress (Stanley, Rhoades, Olmos-Gallo, & Markman, 2007). Presently, this is something of an unresolved issue in the evaluation of the PREP program, but this controversy illustrates how efforts to improve family communication can sometimes have unintended effects for certain participants.

The speaker-listener technique that is a staple in the PREP program has been criticized by some marital researchers for not being the most effective way to create change in married couples’ communication (Gottman et al., 1998). Gottman and his colleagues found that in laboratory interactions, married couples rarely if ever exhibited this active listening technique. Naturally, the developers of PREP strenuously disagreed with Gottman and continue to stand by the value of the active listening model as taught in the speaker-listener technique (see Hafen & Crane, 2003, for detailed account of this debate).

There is some compelling evidence for the effectiveness of PREP, but at the same time there are other cases of less than ideal results. For example, 4–5 years after completing the program, there were no significant differences in the divorce/separation rate of couples who had participated in PREP versus couples in a control group or couples who declined to participate in PREP (Markman et al., 1993). An adaptation of PREP in the Netherlands indicated that breakups, problem intensity, and sexual dissatisfaction were higher following participation in PREP than a control condition (Van Widenfelt, Hosman, Schaap, & van der Staak, 1996). Did participation in PREP actually hurt these Dutch couples? One unique aspect of Van Widenfelt et al.’s sample is that couples in the PREP condition had been together for 9.1 years on average, compared to 6.3 years for those in the control group. Obviously many of the PREP couples had already been married or in a marriage-like relationship. It is possible that some of these couples were already on a downward trajectory before the program started. Another issue that has plagued evaluation of PREP is a potential self-selection bias (Kelly & Fincham, 1999). In one study of PREP’s effectiveness, only 39% of those couples offered PREP actually completed the program (Markman et al., 1993). It is therefore possible that the effectiveness of PREP has been tested mostly on highly motivated couples. It is not surprising that such

couples benefit from its lectures and workshops. However, in fairness to the program, it should be noted that PREP has been one of the most carefully studied marital preparation programs to date. There is no reason to believe that other premarital preparation programs would fare any better if their effectiveness was tested as carefully as PREP.

Other Marriage Preparation Programs

As noted earlier, PREP is but one of many different marital preparation programs. Before moving on to other programs and therapies for the improvement of family communication, it is informative to briefly examine several other popular marriage preparation programs to compare and contrast approaches taken by practitioners to prevent marital distress.

A unique and straightforward program for engaged couples was developed by David Olson (who also developed the circumplex model of family functioning) and is centered on a measurement instrument called PREPARE, which stands for “Premarital Personal and Relationship Evaluation” (Fowers & Olson, 1986; Olson & Olson, 1999). PREPARE is based on the assumption that the nature of premarital relationships can predict the quality of marital relationships. The goal of the program is to assess those areas of the couple’s relationship that are most predictive of marital success, to give the couple feedback on those assessments, and to have them engage in skill-building exercises. The PREPARE instrument has 125 questions designed to measure the following areas of relational functioning: realistic expectations, personality issues, communication, conflict resolution, financial management, leisure activities, sexual relationship, children and parenting, family and friends, egalitarian roles, and religious orientation. Based on their scores, premarital couples are categorized as vitalized, harmonious, traditional, or conflicted. This questionnaire has been extensively studied and validated (e.g., Fowers, Montel, & Olson, 1996; Fowers & Olson, 1986, 1992) and premarital scores on the PREPARE instrument predict subsequent divorce during the first 3 years of marriage with 80–90% accuracy (Fowers & Olson, 1986; Larsen & Olson, 1989).

A common means by which many couples encounter the PREPARE instrument is when they meet with a clergy member in preparation for marriage. The questionnaire is often administered as part of premarital counseling, and then after its computer scoring the couple meets again with the clergy member to discuss the results. The couple is then given a workbook called *Building a Strong Marriage* with exercises that involve, for example, effective conflict resolution, developing personal, couple, and family goals, and strengthening couple communication through assertiveness and active listening (Olson & Olson, 1999). Premarital couples who participate in PREPARE tend to exhibit significantly increased relationship satisfaction relative to control couples who did not participate in the program (Knutson & Olson, 2003).

PREPARE is an attractive program because, like PREP, it is based on sound scientific evidence. In addition, it is easy to administer and easy to participate in. The PREPARE instrument is extensive and is likely to bring important issues to the surface that many couples may not have discussed in much detail. For that reason, completing the questionnaire and discussing the results may prompt valuable interactions and negotiations before the couple actually gets married. PREPARE has also been modified for use with already married couples and that version of the program is referred to as ENRICH (Olson & Fowers, 1993), an acronym for “Enriching Relationship Issues, Communication, and Happiness.”

Guerney’s Relationship Enhancement Program (RE; Guerney, 1977) has also been a popular program and is one of the first designed particularly for couples contemplating marriage. Ridley and Sladeczek (1992) explain that “the cardinal goal of the RE program is to teach attitudes and skills that will enable the participants to relate to significant others in ways that will maximize satisfaction of emotional and functional needs” (p. 150). RE is offered to groups of 3 or 4 couples by two group leaders in eight 3-hour weekly sessions. The program includes such techniques as leader modeling, supervised practice, and weekly “homework” sessions. A major thrust of RE involves teaching couples self-disclosure about

their feelings, elimination of blaming messages, and building active listening skills. Other important communication skills taught in RE include expressiveness, empathy, discussion and negotiation, and problem/conflict resolution (Accordino & Guernsey, 2003). Controlled studies indicate that RE is effective in increasing expressed affection, relationship adjustment, empathy, trust, couple communication, and self-esteem (Accordino & Guernsey; Ridley & Bain, 1983; Ridley, Jorgensen, Morgan, & Avery, 1982; Ridley & Sladeczek, 1992). Improvements in communication skills such as empathy and self-disclosure have been documented immediately after participating in the RE program and at a 3-month follow-up (Avery, Ridley, Leslie, & Milholland, 1980). One of the useful features of RE is its applicability for both premarital couples, reflecting primary prevention, as well as mildly distressed already married couples, representing secondary prevention (Accordino & Guernsey).

One of the more newly developed programs, Marital Assessment and Preparation (MAP; McGeorge & Carlson, 2006) has the stated goal of “improving participants’ knowledge concerning marital relationships and to teach healthy patterns of interacting that are believed to lead to improved readiness and preparation for the transition to marriage” (p. 174). This is achieved through discussing the concept of marriage, family of origin issues, expectations for marriage, communication and conflict resolution skills, division of labor, power and control, intimacy, expressions of anger and love, and conflict around wedding planning. Preliminary findings support the effectiveness of the intervention for teaching healthy interaction skills more so than expectations and attitudes about marriage (McGeorge & Carlson).

There are many other premarital intervention programs such as “Saving Your Marriage Before it Starts” (SYMBIS; Parrott & Parrott, 1999), the Marriage Project (Russell & Lyster, 1992), and the Premarital Education and Training Sequence (PETS; Bagarozzi, Bagarozzi, Anderson, & Pollane, 1984). In addition, enrichment programs have been developed to improve the quality of existing marriages before any major problems occur (e.g., Mace, 1975; Dyer & Dyer, 1999). Teaching effective marital communication and conflict resolution skills is an essential element of all of these primary prevention programs.

Secondary Prevention Strategies

There are some cases where families are functioning reasonably well but are clearly at risk for troubles in the future. For example, new parents and couples who have been married for a moderate amount of time may be presently happy, but are at risk for experiencing stress in the role as a parent or distress associated with changes inherent in many long-term marriages. Efforts to help such families avoid experiencing distress can be characterized as secondary prevention strategies. There is sometimes a fine line that distinguishes primary and secondary prevention strategies. The programs that we review in this section fall into the classes of marital enrichment and parent training. We characterize these programs as secondary prevention because they presume that the married couples or parents are at some risk for distress. It is often assumed that this potential distress is just a normative part of the challenges of being a parent or being married to the same person for many years. Obviously, some of these programs could also be characterized as primary prevention programs. It is interesting to note however that enhancing communication, interaction patterns, and relationship quality is a common theme to these secondary prevention programs as well as the primary prevention programs discussed earlier in this chapter (Diskin, 1986).

Marriage Encounter

Description

There is an interesting story behind the development of the Marriage Encounter program. A Spanish priest named Father Gabriel Calvo found that many couples were seeking his

help with marital and family problems. In an effort to help such people, he recruited a group of 28 couples with successful marriages to work on developing a program that could help married couples develop and maintain the same kind of quality in their own relationships. So, in 1952 he founded *Encuentre Conyugal*, the Spanish precursor to the modern day Marriage Encounter. This program was eventually brought to America in 1966, originally offered in Miami to Cuban refugee couples (see Genovese, 1975, for a historical analysis of Marriage Encounter).

A major assumption behind Marriage Encounter is that all married couples go through phases of illusion, disillusion, and joy. How they handle the disillusion phase is vital in determining whether or not they will stay together and attain the “joy” phase (Elin, 1999). This key assumption, which is actually consistent with the scientific research on marital satisfaction over the life span (see chapters 6 and 11), situates Marriage Encounter in the realm of secondary prevention as discussed by L’Abate (1990). Because all marriages are assumed to experience a decline in satisfaction (i.e., “disillusion”), they are seen as at-risk, and the program is an effort to intervene before that risk develops into serious distress.

Marriage Encounter is a faith-based weekend program that is offered through many different religious denominations. It is based on the concepts of faith and dialogue (Genovese, 1975). The program is ordinarily offered over the course of a Friday evening to a Sunday afternoon at a “retreat house,” hotel, or other location in which couples can get away from their regular work and family routine. The idea behind Marriage Encounter is to give husbands and wives the opportunity to focus on each other free from other distractions. Marriage Encounters are typically led by one or two lay couples and a member of the clergy. Over the weekend, couples progress through the program’s four stages: “I,” “We,” “We–God,” and “We–God–World.” Participating couples hear a series of 13 presentations on various topics such as stress and marriage, disillusion, and Biblical tenets regarding marriage and family (Elin, 1999). Often couples who lead the program will model husband–wife communication. After most of the presentations, participants are given a list of questions or instructions to which they individually respond in writing. Sample questions include “What three times have I felt most united with you?” “What are my reasons to want to go on living?” and “What are the symptoms of spiritual divorce in our relationship?” (Witteman & Fitzpatrick, 1986). Spouses then share their written reflections with each other and discuss them. This is the “dialogue” technique that is a staple of Marriage Encounter. There is no group sharing in the Marriage Encounter. The only time couples are together as a group is when they are listening to presentations. The rest of the time they are by themselves, either writing or discussing each other’s written reflections. For this reason it is often said that couples do not receive Marriage Encounter, but rather give the encounter to each other. After several days of listening to presentations, writing personal reflections, and discussing them with each other, spouses reunite for a final ceremony. They are then encouraged to (1) continue to write daily love letters to each other and discuss them, (2) return for a reunion or refresher once a month to maintain the health of their marriage, and (3) tell other couples about their positive experience with the encounter.

If the idea of writing intimate letters to each other and discussing them over the course of a weekend sounds somewhat out of the ordinary, perhaps some historical context would be instructive. As noted earlier, the Marriage Encounter “movement” as it is sometimes called emerged in the 1960s when humanistic psychology and the human potential movements were at their peak. The idea behind this movement and the many “encounter groups” that sprang up during this time was that all people have potential that can be unlocked and realized by getting in touch with their true self and sharing this with others. This mentality is still evident today in the architecture of the Marriage Encounter program. Incidentally, like religious denominations themselves, the Marriage Encounter leadership has become divided over issues of spirituality and the use of certain techniques in the program. Hence, they have split up into the “National Marriage Encounter,” “World Wide Marriage Encounter,” and “United Marriage Encounter.”

Literally millions of couples have participated in Marriage Encounter programs over the course of the past 40 years. Although these couples come from all walks of life, they understandably score high on measures of religiosity, physical and psychological health, and satisfaction with their spouse and family (Silverman & Urbaniak, 1983). In other words, Marriage Encounter appears to attract very motivated couples who want to keep a good thing going.

Evaluation

The majority of couples who participate in Marriage Encounter rate their experience very favorably (Elin, 1999; Lester & Doherty, 1983). Many report that it had a positive and long-term impact on their communication. However, one test of Marriage Encounter couples against a waiting list control group found no significant differences in self-disclosure (Milholland & Avery, 1982). This is remarkable given the massive emphasis on self-disclosure through the “dialogue” technique. However, Milholland and Avery (1982) explain that “the goal of dialogue in Marriage Encounter does not focus on better understanding and problem solving but rather on the experience of oneness and on an emotional high” (pp. 88–89). Other family scholars have been critical of the Marriage Encounter movement for its failure to teach any specific communication and problem solving skills that are so vital to marital well-being (Witteman & Fitzpatrick, 1986). Others have criticized Marriage Encounter for its excessive mysticism and secrecy (DeYoung, 1979), its singular ideology of the ideal marriage (Doherty, McCabe, & Ryder, 1978), for being overly authoritarian and coercive (Doherty et al., 1978), and for creating negative effects in about 10% of the participating couples (Doherty, Lester, & Leigh, 1986; Lester & Doherty, 1983). It appears that participating in Marriage Encounter could be a risk for already distressed couples as they are prone to “dumping” on each other through the dialogues. As communication scholars are well-aware, emotional expression without problem solving can be very corrosive to an already fragile relationship. Another problem that has been cited in the literature is the development of an intense husband–wife bond to the exclusion of relations with children (Doherty & Walker, 1982). It seems then that one thing missing from Marriage Encounter is attention to communication skills that will allow couples not only to share their feelings with each other, but to actually resolve and work through these issues in cases where they are not always positive. Undoubtedly, sharing thoughts and feelings is useful to most marriages, but leveraging self-disclosure can be risky without the context of sensitive and effective communication skills. Unlike some of the other interventions described in this chapter, Marriage Encounter has had very few published outcome studies and so it is still regarded as an empirically untested program (Jakubowski, Milne, Brunner, & Miller, 2004).

The Couples Communication Program

Description

The Couples Communication Program, originally known as the Minnesota Couples Communication Program, is an educational program that focuses specifically on teaching effective communication skills (Miller, Nunnally, & Wackman, 1976; Nunnally, Miller, & Wackman, 1975). The basic premise of the Couples Communication Program is that interpersonal competence can be taught and learned. For this reason the program is focused on communication skills instead of communication content. The two main objectives of the Couples Communication Program are (1) increasing self-awareness and other-awareness, and (2) enhancing communication skills to allow for mutually satisfying interactions (Nunnally et al., 1975). The program utilizes hands on exercises to improve both verbal and nonverbal communication skills (Miller & Sherrard, 1999). The Couples Communication Program is based on elements of systems theory, symbolic interactionism, and family life cycle theories

(Nunnally et al., 1975). The couple is viewed as a system, and a major goal is to equip them with the communication skills that will allow them to effectively face the developmental challenges that all couples experience over their life span (see chapter 11).

The Couples Communication Program is ordinarily offered to groups of 5 to 7 couples, led by two certified instructors. The group meets weekly in 3-hour sessions for 4 weeks. The developers feel that the group session is ideal for learning communication skills because couples can receive feedback from peers and observe multiple models and identify the skills that they use, or need to use (Nunnally et al., 1975). Before beginning the program, couples are briefly screened to ensure that both members are each voluntarily participating and that each is committed to participating in the full program. Program sessions involve brief lectures, exercises, feedback, and discussions about prior sessions. Couples also do outside reading in between sessions. During the first session, couples are introduced to the “awareness wheel.” This is a visual aid to help couples appreciate the various aspects of awareness such as sensing, feeling, thinking, and wanting. A series of skills are then presented for verbally expressing awareness. Nunnally et al. (1975, pp. 64–65) present the following example of a desirable message:

I'd like to go out more often with you. (self-responsible speaking for self)

and the following examples of undesirable alternatives:

You never want to go anywhere! (over-responsible speaking for other)

It would be nice to go out. (under-responsible speaking for no one)

The idea here is to make people aware of what they are thinking and feeling, and then teaching them to clearly express those feelings to their partner. The second session shifts to listening skills and acknowledging messages from other people. During this session the concept of “shared meaning” is introduced. This concept is comparable to the “intent = impact” model of effective communication that is taught in the PREP program. The idea here is to strive for a mutual understanding of issues through couple communication so that the two people are on the same page so to speak. The third session focuses on communication styles and the concept of metacommunication (being aware of and discussing how they communicate with each other), and the fourth session centers on the relationship between methods of dealing with conflict and building, maintaining, or diminishing each other’s self-esteem.

Evaluation

Research conducted by the developers of the Couples Communication Program is generally supportive of its intended goals (Miller et al., 1976; Nunnally et al., 1975). These authors report that people who participate in the program show greater awareness of their interaction styles and exhibit better communication skills for addressing various relational issues. Wampler (1982) reviewed the findings from 19 studies of the Couples Communication Program and found that it had an immediate positive effect on couples’ communication style and relational satisfaction. However, participation in the program had no apparent effect on self-esteem or self-disclosure. Furthermore, there was no strong evidence for the durability of its positive effects. Very few studies followed couples for more than 6 months after participating in the program. A comparison of the Couples Communication Program with another enrichment program, the Communication Skills Workshop, and a waiting list control group, indicated substantial improvement in nonverbal communication and positive views of partners’ communication for people in the Couples Communication Program (Witkin, Edleson, Rose, & Hall, 1983). However, there were no group differences in positive verbal communication, problem solving communication, or marital satisfaction. A subsequent meta analysis of 16 studies that evaluated the Couples Communication Program also showed moderate effects for immediately

improving relationship satisfaction, but these effects dissipated when couples were followed up after some time had passed (Butler & Wampler, 1999). These findings suggest that the Couples Communication Program has some positive effects but still has considerable room for improvement. In many ways, the Couples Communication Program is the polar opposite of Marriage Encounter. In the Couples Communication Program the emphasis is on communication skills rather than intense and prolonged self-disclosure. However, program leaders have obviously experienced some difficulty in teaching communication skills in just four sessions in such a way as to have noticeable and lasting impact on couples' problem solving communication and marital satisfaction.

Parent Training Programs

Description

Raising a child is one of the most demanding tasks undertaken by the family. Effective parenting requires a complex array of skills, and of course children are not born with an instruction manual. Consequently, practitioners have developed numerous different programs to teach people how to be effective parents. Two such programs that we will cover in this section are Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP) and Behavioral Parent Training. Because of their similar prevention philosophy and goals, we will explore each of these briefly in this section. Each of these parent training programs represents an interesting mixture of primary and secondary prevention philosophies. On one hand, it is assumed that if parents can develop effective skills for raising children, based on good communication, effective instructional techniques, and positive regard for the child, then their children will eventually develop into healthy and functional adults. From such a vantage point, parent training programs clearly fit into the category of primary prevention (for the child). On the other hand, the people who developed parent training programs are undoubtedly aware of the many challenges and difficulties that face new, and even experienced, parents. It is reasonable to assume that the skills learned in parent training programs make the job of parenting less stressful and more enjoyable. Viewed from this perspective, parent training programs could be said to pursue secondary prevention (for the parent). For parents who are struggling to control their child's problem behaviors, many parent training programs also fit the secondary prevention philosophy for the child.

Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP) is an educational program, developed by Drinkmeyer and McKay (1976, 1989), and is based on Alderian psychology and the idea that children seek a meaningful place in a group that will accept them. STEP is probably the most popular and well-known parent training technique and has spun off many related training programs (Brock, Oertwein, & Coufal, 1993). It is generally offered by a trained professional with supporting materials over weekly meetings. The primary element of STEP is to help parents understand the *goals of child misbehavior*. These include attention getting, power, revenge, and expression of inadequacy. Parents in the STEP program are encouraged to try to identify the motivation behind their child's misbehavior and to act accordingly. For example, misbehavior that is aimed at attention getting should be ignored. Even punishing the child in such cases gives him or her unnecessary attention. Rather, parents are taught to give their children attention in response to positive, desirable behaviors. Parents are also taught to identify power struggles and to withdraw from rather than escalate them. When parents "win" power struggles, the child is only further motivated to seek power. Another important element of STEP is the experience of *consequences*. Parents in STEP are taught to influence their children's behaviors by allowing them to experience the natural consequences of their own behavior. It is often said that experience is the best teacher. STEP teaches parents to avoid shielding their children from the logical consequences of their own behavior. So, for example, a child who refuses to eat all of his dinner should be allowed to go hungry later in the evening instead of being allowed to have snacks before bed. In theory, such experience will teach the child the

importance of eating all of his dinner. In STEP parents are instructed to take a matter-of-fact attitude toward these consequences and not to frame them as punishments. Just as natural consequences are preferred over parent initiated punishments, STEP teaches that *encouragement* is more desirable than praise. Praise is viewed as a power tactic that focuses on the end state rather than the effort expended to get there. Encouragement from parents causes children to focus on the effort that they put into a task and not on perfectionism. Ultimately this promotes autonomy and responsibility. Finally, STEP teaches parents to use regular *family meetings* to openly discuss issues that are of concern to the family. These meetings are to be run in a democratic fashion such that all family members are free to express their point of view. An innovative adjunct to STEP involves the inclusion of an intensive in-home family service program of 12–18 weeks in which a counselor takes an educational stance and helps parents to incorporate choice into family decision making (Fulkerson, 2007). The theory behind this is that if children can exercise some choices of their own they are more likely to accept rules because they take some ownership of them, as opposed to seeing the rules as imposed by others.

Behavioral Parent Training

Behavioral parent training actually refers to a collection of parenting programs that are based on learning theory principles such as conditioning, coercion, reciprocity, and modeling (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1993). Behavioral parent training programs are applicable to everyday parenting challenges as well as treatment of more disturbed and aggressive behavior in children and can be flexibly applied to a range of family situations (Forehand & Kotchick, 2002).

Readers who are familiar with behavioral learning theories will recall that *reinforcement* is vital in shaping human behavior. The use of positive reinforcement for desirable behaviors is a staple in behavioral parent training. Examples of this include complimenting a child for a job well done or giving the child \$10 for bringing home a good report card. In behavioral parent training, parents are taught to eliminate or extinguish problem behaviors, not through punishment, but by rewarding desirable behaviors that are incompatible with the unwanted behavior. For example, a parent who wants her child to walk instead of run at the shopping mall might compliment the child for staying near her and walking slowly. The idea is that one cannot simultaneously run and walk, so if the child experiences a reward for walking, the running behavior is automatically extinguished without any use of punishment. *Token systems* are related to rewards. Parents who give their children stars, points, etc. for performing desirable behaviors are using tokens. Tokens are a sort of bookkeeping system in which parents figuratively reward the child for positive behaviors. The token itself may have little intrinsic value, but may ultimately be cashed in for various treats, money, or even dismissal from having to do chores. Although tokens can be a very effective motivator for children, parents run the risk of prompting performance of behavior only for extrinsic reward. In other words, children may come to rely on the reward and stop performing the desired behavior unless the token is immediately forthcoming. Because people eventually have to perform most tasks (e.g., putting dirty clothes in the laundry, making the bed) in the absence of external rewards, parents must eventually abandon the technique. Another effective tool of behavioral parent training is *timeout* (see also chapter 7). Timeout is an alternative to punishment that removes a child from a source of positive reinforcement. Parents can create a timeout for the child by temporarily taking away a toy, separating him or her from a playmate, turning off the television, or moving the child to a different environment. The idea behind timeout is to terminate ongoing positive reinforcement until the child's behavior improves, at which time previous activities can resume. *Modeling* is another important technique that involves parents demonstrating desirable behaviors to the child. For example, when a parent is upset he may explain why he is unhappy and talk things through calmly rather than resorting to yelling and shouting. In theory, children who repeatedly observe this behavior will learn that talking, instead of shouting, is an appropriate way for two people to resolve their differences.

Behavioral parent training is most commonly delivered through a mix of didactic instruction, role plays, and live or videotaped modeling. The goals are to teach parents to monitor youth behaviors and to avoid coercive interactions by positively reinforcing prosocial behavior and creating appropriate consequences for instances of noncompliance. A detailed example of steps involved in behavioral parent training can be found in Van Camp, Vollmer et al. (2008).

Evaluation

Most of the parent training programs appear to be at least somewhat effective. The effectiveness of STEP has been tested in a number of research studies. Brock et al. (1993) conclude that positive changes in parent–child interaction, improved parental attitudes, and more favorable perceptions of child behaviors rank among the most consistent results of this program. Adams (2001) compared parents who participated in STEP to a group that received routine mental health services. He found that participation in STEP was associated with improved problem solving, communication, affective responsiveness, and behavior control. Further, STEP was able to generate clinical recovery in 38% of the families that were clinically distressed at the start of the program. Thus, there is clear evidence that STEP works, and that it does so in part through improving parent–child communication.

Research studies on different types of behavioral parent training programs show that it is generally effective and can be regarded as a “best practice” for most populations (Lonigan, Elbert, & Johnson, 1998). Documented effects include improved child compliance with parental directives and less aggression, as well as improvements in parent behaviors such as greater attention to rewarding positive child behaviors and more appropriate communicating with the child (e.g., Eyberg & Robinson, 1982). Behavioral parent training has been shown to be effective for helping families manage common child behavior problems, including antisocial behavior (McCart, Priester, Davies, & Azen, 2006), externalizing and disruptive behaviors such as acting out, conduct problems, noncompliance, and delinquency (Maughan, Christiansen, Jenson, Olympia, & Clark, 2005), and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (Pelham & Fabiano, 2008). Parents who participate in behavioral parent training often develop demonstrably better parenting skills (Van Camp, Vollmer et al., 2008) and these skills can be maintained for years by participating in brief booster sessions (Van Camp, Montgomery et al., 2008). Unfortunately, behavioral parent training does not work for all families. Long-term follow-up assessments often show significant child behavior problems in 30–40% of families that participate in behavioral parent training (Assemany & McIntosh, 2002). Assemany and McIntosh (2002) found that behavioral parent training is least likely to be effective when (1) the family is economically disadvantaged, (2) there is dysfunction in the family system, and (3) the child behavior problem is severe.

There is at least some supportive evidence for the effectiveness of most parent training programs (e.g., Coren, Barlow, & Stewart-Brown, 2003). One key ingredient in these and other parent training programs (e.g., Anderson & Nuttall, 1987; Hall & Rose, 1987; van Wyk, Eloff, & Heyns, 1983) is an effort to teach parents how to more effectively communicate with their children. Even though parenting programs such as STEP and Behavioral Parent Training appear to be effective relative to no treatment, there is no conclusive evidence to support the effectiveness of one over the other (Brock et al., 1993; Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1993).

TERTIARY PREVENTION STRATEGIES

Over the years practitioners have developed a number of different family and couples therapy techniques. Many of these techniques are associated with various “schools” of thought, such as cognitive-behavioral, psychoanalytic, and so forth. Ethical guidelines and licensing procedures

for family therapists have been established by the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT). A thorough review of all the different therapeutic techniques is obviously far beyond the scope of this chapter (see Jacobson & Gurman, 1995; Griffin & Greene, 1999; Kaslow, Kaslow, & Farber, 1999; Nichols & Schwartz, 1998, for reviews). Instead we briefly present two different types of family therapy that have been influential in the treatment of family dysfunction over the past 30 years and also illustrative of the strong focus on communication and relationships. After all, as Kaslow et al. (1999) noted, “most family therapists concur that a paramount goal of therapy is to change the family systems’ interactional patterns, with individual change occurring as a product of systems change” (p. 770). In other words, family therapists try to resolve family problems and reduce family distress by helping the family to improve their communication and relationships with each other. The idea is that once relationships are improved or repaired distress and dysfunction naturally fade.

Behavioral and Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy

Behavioral and cognitive-behavioral therapies utilize a variety of techniques that are based on social learning theory (see chapter 2) and social exchange theory (chapter 4). The fundamental assumption of behavioral approaches to treating couples or families is that people maintain each other’s behavior through the use or misuse of reinforcement (Jacobson, 1992; Jacobson & Margolin, 1979; Jacobson & Martin, 1976). The goal of behavioral marital therapy is to teach the couple how to recognize and initiate rewarding interactions while decreasing aversive interactions that draw the couple apart (Kaslow et al., 1999). Behavioral couple’s therapy started out with an emphasis on identifying and exchanging rewarding behaviors (Gurman & Fraenkel, 2002). *Communication* and *problem solving skills* were viewed as an essential means by which couples could achieve satisfaction in their relationships and initiate rewarding interactions. Pursuant to that, couples in this type of therapy are taught about specific communication behaviors that can be aversive such as interruptions, getting sidetracked, and inducing guilt. The goal is to try to get each spouse to become aware of these behaviors and their effects and to ultimately minimize their use. In addition to communication skills training, behavioral couples therapy often employs the technique of *behavioral contracting* (Baucom, 1984). This involves teaching the couple to perform or exchange rewarding behaviors, with the understanding, or perhaps expectation, that similarly rewarding behaviors will be forthcoming from the partner. Later developments in behavioral couple’s therapy added a focus on teaching partners *mutual acceptance* and *self-regulation* (Gurman & Fraenkel, 2002). Mutual acceptance occurs when partners accept each other and the fact that there may be some aspects of the partner that cannot be changed. Self-regulation shifts the emphasis from trying to produce positive partner behaviors to managing one’s own behavior for the betterment of the relationship.

Hahlweg and Markman’s (1988) meta-analysis of the research studies on behavioral marital therapy indicated that the average person in this type of therapy was better off at the end of treatment than 83% of the people in control groups. This improvement appears to be stable for at least 3 to 12 months. Although there was considerable evidence that some couples who experienced behavioral marital therapy were still distressed after treatment, this type of therapy appears effective for the majority of couples (about 70%) who try it. However, about half of those couples who experience immediate benefit from behavioral couples therapy relapse back to a distressed level within two years (Jacobson & Addis, 1993; Kelly & Fincham, 1999).

At the same time that behavioral therapy was being widely applied to marital and family problems, the field of clinical psychology was being swept up in the “cognitive revolution.” Not surprisingly, some behavioral therapists attached themselves to many of the ideas and concepts inherent in theories of cognitive psychology. What resulted is now known as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). CBT preserves many of the original aspects of behavioral therapy but also recognizes that people’s cognitions about marital and family interactions will strongly

affect subsequent behaviors and satisfaction with those relationships. Say, for example, a wife buys her husband a six pack of his favorite beer. A husband in a distressed relationship might make an attribution such as “she’s just doing this to butter me up so that I’ll go over to her parents’ house tonight for dinner.” In this example, the wife performs what should be a rewarding behavior for the husband, but his attributional tendency is such that any positive impact of the behavior is minimized. Instead, he sees the positive gesture as a cunning ploy. People in CBT are taught to identify these maladaptive cognitive patterns and work toward their change—a technique known as *cognitive restructuring*.

In the larger family context, CBT focuses on the interrelation of family members’ cognitions, emotions, actions, and relationships (Friedberg, 2006). Some of the key techniques of cognitive behavioral family therapy include *self-monitoring* (observing specific cognitive, behavioral, and interpersonal processes), *self-instruction* (changing cognitive distortions and automatic thoughts to replace them with more accurate beliefs), *rational analysis* (drawing conclusions based on newly collected information), and *behavioral enactment* (setting up situations to elicit dysfunctional patterns and then trying out alternative interaction patterns) (Friedberg). Although certain elements of CBT may appear to be very intrapsychic or purely psychological, it is obvious that these cognitive patterns have profound family and relational implications. Family cognitive behavior therapy has been applied with considerable success to treating problems such as anxiety disorders in children (Kendall, Hudson, Gosch, Flannery-Schroeder, & Suveg, 2008).

Structural Family Therapy

Structural family therapy was developed by Salvador Minuchin and his associates (Minuchin, 1974; Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). This type of therapy gets its name from the focus on family structure—the hierarchical organization of the family that is marked by boundaries between the family system and outside environment, as well as boundaries that delineate subsystems within the family. An explicit assumption of structural family therapy is that families experience changes as they progress through the family life cycle. To remain happy, healthy, and functional, the family needs to adjust its structure and norms of interactions to adapt to these naturally occurring changes. Minuchin argued that dysfunctional families have problems with *boundary regulation*, *power imbalances*, and *inappropriate alignments*. When boundaries are poorly regulated children can act like parents and parents like children. Minuchin felt that there should be a clear boundary between parents and children, with parents in charge. Power imbalances occur when one family member wields too much power. Although it may be tempting to conclude that this would ordinarily be a parent, that is not necessarily the case. In some dysfunctional families, the parents cater to children to such an extent that the children are the ones who are running the show. When inappropriate alignments are present, two or more family members “team up” against others in the family. Even though such coalitions are common, when they become severe, involving serious issues, this can be a major problem for the family.

These types of structural dysfunctions in families are often found in *enmeshed* and *disengaged* families. Enmeshed families are so involved in each other’s affairs and are so immediately reactive to each other’s moods that they cannot function effectively as individuals or as a family. These families have serious problems with boundary regulation. At the opposite extreme, disengaged families do not seem to care much at all about each other.

The primary goal of structural family therapy is to reorganize the family unit, with the therapist as a sort of leader or conductor, so that the family can have more functional interactions (Fishman & Fishman, 2003; Kalsow et al., 1999). Therapy progresses through the cyclical stages of *joining*, *assessing*, and *restructuring*. Joining simply means that the family therapist will temporarily enter the family system, again, as a type of leader. Structural family therapists will often assess such family dynamics as boundary quality, flexibility, interaction

patterns, presence of subsystems, coalitions, and how the family system maintains the symptoms or dysfunctional behavior of its distressed member(s). The restructuring phase is complex and involves the therapist attempting to create new awareness and change in the family in how they interact. This may be accomplished through such therapeutic techniques as *enactments* (getting the family to act out particular dysfunctional interaction patterns so the therapist can intervene), *paradox* (deliberately attempting to confuse family members to jar them out of their entrenched ways of thinking), *spatial interventions* (temporarily removing a family member from a therapy session, or having a particular family member observe the session from behind a one-way mirror), and *upsetting homeostasis* (the therapist temporarily sides with one family member or coalition to modify the typical family hierarchy). Fishman (2006) also advocated additional techniques in structural family therapy for juvenile Anorexia Nervosa. These include *crisis induction* which is trying to create a therapeutic crisis that requires immediate family reaction in terms of changing its structure, and *enactment* in which family members deal directly with each other thus allowing the therapist to observe and modify their interaction. The goal of these techniques is to establish and maintain functional boundaries within the family and to replace dysfunctional ways of interacting with family interaction patterns that are satisfying to the family system and self-reinforcing.

CONCLUSION

Most of the organized programs for improving family relations can be characterized as either primary prevention (building skills to prevent major problems from ever occurring), secondary prevention (identifying at-risk families and enhancing their communication and coping skills), or tertiary prevention (providing therapy to distressed families). Among the primary prevention strategies, marriage preparation programs have figured prominently. The PREP program is a good example of a primary prevention program that is educational in nature, teaching participants about expectations, commitment, communication skills, and enhancing their relational bond. In fact, communication skills training is an important part of most programs aimed at preventing marital and family distress. The PREP program stands out for being one of the most rigorously evaluated primary prevention programs and it appears to be reasonably effective for the majority of couples who participate in it. An analysis of cognitive-behavioral premarital intervention programs such as PREP and RE showed that 79% of the couples who participated in such programs were better off than those who had not or had been in a placebo control group (Hahlweg & Markman, 1988). A meta-analysis of over 100 marriage and relationship education programs showed that overall they are effective in bringing at least slight improvements in relationship quality and even larger improvements in communication skills (Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008). However, evaluating the effectiveness of most marriage preparation programs has been plagued by selection biases (the couples who participate in these programs seem to already have a very strong relationship), as well as a lack of control groups (Jakubowski, Milne, Brunner, & Miller, 2004).

Primary prevention programs for marriage appear to be on an upward trajectory of popularity. A number of states in the US now require couples, or in some cases couples where one spouse is under 18, to enroll in marriage preparation programs or premarital counseling. Other states offer would-be brides and grooms a substantial discount on their marriage license if they complete a marriage preparation program. In the State of Oklahoma, premarital education courses are funded through a combination of state and private dollars and are made available free of charge to all interested residents (see www.OKmarriage.org). Many religious organizations also insist that couples participate in a premarital program prior to being married. All of this attention to primary prevention perhaps reflects the old adage that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. It is easier and more sensible to enhance and inoculate an already

functional relationship than it is to work on repairing a damaged one. For this reason, marriage preparation programs are likely to proliferate even further in the future.

The secondary prevention programs reviewed include marriage enrichment programs such as Marriage Encounter and parent training programs such as STEP. Marriage Encounter places heavy emphasis on self-disclosure but has been criticized for not teaching necessary communication skills. There is some empirical support for the effectiveness of such marital enrichment programs but also some evidence to show that they are not effective, and in a few cases even harmful, for some couples. A meta-analytic review of 85 studies on marital enrichment programs (including Marriage Encounter and Couples Communication Program) indicated that 67% of the people who participated in these programs were better off than untreated control couples (Giblin, Sprenkle, & Sheehan, 1985). Because chance alone would dictate that 50% of the enrichment couples would be better off than controls, it could be said that enrichment programs represent a 17% improvement over doing nothing. Giblin et al. (1985) also found that enrichment programs have a stronger impact on communication and problem solving variables than on relationship satisfaction.

The parent training programs all work to improve parent-child relationships through understanding children's motives and teaching parents how to interact with their children in ways that promote positive child outcomes. Empathy, positive regard, understanding, active listening, and reinforcement are issues that are addressed in the various parent training programs. The parenting programs reviewed here all assume that good parent-child communication is essential to effective parenting. These programs try to help parents understand and appreciate child psychology. Parents learn how to communicate with their children in ways that will produce desired results. Communicating understanding, appreciation, and positive regard are often presented as necessary components of good parent-child relations. The research that has been conducted on the effectiveness of parenting programs generally indicates that they produce positive outcomes for parents and children. Given the complexity and challenges of parenting coupled with the minimal preparation that most people have for the task, it is understandable why participation in parenting programs has such benefits.

Tertiary prevention strategies address problems after they have already developed. Unfortunately, many families and couples seek therapy after it is already too late. This is one reason why "success" rates for family therapy may not always be as high as they are for primary and secondary prevention strategies. Behavioral and Cognitive-Behavioral therapies place a strong emphasis on teaching communication skills and effective problem solving. An important part of this type of therapy is identifying and promoting behaviors that are positively reinforcing and avoiding or discouraging those that are punishing to the family. Techniques such as behavioral contracting, teaching mutual acceptance, and self-regulation are also a regular part of behaviorally oriented family therapy. This therapeutic strategy has been augmented by the cognitive-behavioral paradigm that includes many aspects of behavioral therapy but also focuses on changing the dysfunctional cognitions that harm relationships and family interactions. Structural family therapy is concerned with the arrangement of family relationships and interactions. Issues such as boundary regulation, power imbalances, and inappropriate alignments are important areas that are addressed in this type of family therapy. Structural family therapy is aimed at reorganizing the family system through the processes of joining, assessing, and restructuring. Family therapy is often a very useful means for solving what might even appear to be intrapersonal problems such as depression (e.g., Diamond, Reis, Diamond, Siqueland, & Isaacs, 2002). Many of the problems for which families seek help are really system-wide problems in that they are caused, maintained, or exacerbated by family interactions. The goal of most family therapies is to create improvements in family relationships and communication so the problems can naturally dissipate.

Concepts that cut across these organized efforts to improve family relations include self-disclosure, active listening, positively reinforcing messages, perspective taking, conflict resolution skills, and problem solving skills. There is reason to believe that with guided instruction

on these techniques people can improve their family relationships and interactions. However, such change is not easy to come by and is more difficult to produce if families or couples allow relationships to deteriorate too far before seeking intervention.

We began this chapter by raising some fundamental questions about whether and how it is possible to improve family communication. A brief analysis of some of the available programs and therapies suggests that families can improve their communication and relationships. However, such efforts are best pursued before major problems develop. Often people do not want to admit that they need training or therapy to help them deal with their family members. The problem then is to get the people in most need to participate in programs to improve family communication. However, people cannot be forced into such programs other than in extreme cases such as when the court system orders participation in family counseling. The challenge for the future then is to (1) make people aware of programs and practices that are effective at improving family communication, and (2) increase participation in these programs, particularly by those most in need, who are incidentally often the ones least likely to participate in such programs.

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392 References

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412 References

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414 References

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418 References

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422 References

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434 References

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436 References

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456 References

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460 References

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Author Index

A

- Aasland, O.G., 245
Abbott, D.A., 351–61, 365
Abramson, L.Y., 132, 296–97
Accordino, M.P., 377
Acicmo, R., 332, 335, 367–68
Ackerman, L.K., 338
Ackerman, M.A., 338
Ackreman, P.L., 103
Acock, A.C., 25, 270
Adams, B.N., 108–3, 187, 206
Adams, J.F., 383
Adams, R.E., 155
Adams, S.L., 351, 361, 365
Addis, A., 384
Addison, P., 341
Adrian, C., 298
Affenito, S.G., 308
Afifi, T.D., 63–6, 84–5, 164, 199, 245–46, 261–62, 265, 273, 275, 283–84, 357
Afifi, W.A., 63–4
Agras, W.S., 324
Ahmad, S., 309
Ahrons, C.R., 5, 262, 281
Ahuja, R.B.D., 72
AhYun, K., 98
Ainsworth, M.D.S., 38
Akiskal, H.S., 299
Albrecht, T.L., 223
Alder, M.C., 349–50
Aldous, J., 226
Alegria, M., 20
Alessi, G., 127
Alexander, A.L., 59, 346
Alexander, P.C., 354–57
Alexander, S., 174
Alganina, S.W., 321
Alibrando, S.A., 152
Allen, D.A., 248
Allen, E., 337
Allen, E.S., 375
Allen, J.P., 86
Allen, K., 45
Allen, K.R., 25
Allen, W. D., 51, 335
Alpert, E.J., 346
Alterovitz, S.R., 105
Altman, I., 123
Altman, J., 264
Alwin, D.F., 47
Amans, J.A., 259
Amato, P.R., 112, 147, 237, 248, 251, 258–64, 267, 373
American Medical Association, 347
American Psychiatric Association, 295, 302, 207, 313
Ammerman, R.T., 333
Amoloza, T.O., 237
Amstadter, A.B., 367–68
Anders, S.L., 321–22
Anderson, B.J., 328
Anderson, C.M., 180
Anderson, D.G., 103
Anderson, E.R., 289
Anderson, K., 188, 191, 195
Anderson, K.L., 264, 364
Anderson, S.A., 383, 377
Andersson, L., 390
Andrews, J.A., 36
Andrews, K., 333, 335
Angst, E., 272
Antognoli-Toland, P.L., 301
Anwar, R., 347
Aponte, R., 21–2
Appel, J., 222
Apple, R.F., 323–24
Applegate, J.L., 298
Apter, A., 309
Aquan-Assee, J., 168
Aquilino, W.S., 197–98, 288
Arcus, M.E., 372
Arizzi, P., 109
Armesto, J.C., 304, 306
Armistead, L., 338
Armstrong, C., 65
Arnkoﬀ, D.B., 222
Aron, A., 48, 98, 100, 126, 229
Aron, E.N., 98, 100

464 *Author Index*

- Arriaga, X.B., 100
 Arthur, J., 300
 Asante, M.K., 21
 Asendorpf, J.B., 93
 Asmundson, G.J.G., 352, 357
 Asmussen, L.A., 109
 Assemany, A.E., 383
 Atkeson, B.M., 349
 Atkins, D.C., 128, 375
 Attie, L., 308
 Auslander, W.F., 328
 Austin, E.W., 338
 Avery, A.W., 377, 379
 Avins, M., 170
 Avioli, P.S., 191
 Awalt, S.J., 231
 Axinn, W.G., 226, 228
 Azen, R., 383
 Aziz, N., 305–306
- B**
- Babcock, J.C., 363, 359–60, 362–63
 Babin, E.A., 352
 Bacallao, M.L., 23
 Bachar, E., 308, 310
 Badger, T.A., 300, 326–27, 340
 Badr, H., 326
 Badzinski, D.M., 4
 Bagarozzi, D.A., 373, 377
 Bagarozzi, J.I., 377
 Bagozzi, R.P., 78
 Bagun, A., 169
 Bahr, S.J., 113, 269, 335
 Bailey, S.J., 10
 Bain, A.B., 377
 Baker, B., 262
 Baker, C.K., 356
 Baker, J.H., 111
 Baker, J.L., 57–9
 Baker, L., 308, 330
 Baker, T., 53–4
 Bakker, A.B., 245
 Balcer, K.D., 111
 Baldwin, B.M., 126
 Baldwin, J.H., 126
 Baldwin, L.M., 20
 Baldwin, M.W., 40
 Baldwin, S.A., 386
 Ballard-Reisch, D.S., 119
 Ballow, M., 330–31
 Baltés, B.B., 245
 Bandura, A., 33–5, 263, 334
 Banc, C., 323–24
 Banfield, S., 130
 Bank, L., 174
 Banker, B.S., 289
 Banse, R., 252
 Banski, M.A., 123
 Barbato, C.A., 51
 Barber, B.K., 151, 156–57
 Barber, B.L., 168, 178, 285
 Barber, C.E., 233–34
 Barfoot, B., 164
 Barlow, J., 383
 Barnes, G.M., 20, 213, 215, 333
 Baron, L.A., 174, 176
 Barrera, M., 316
 Barrett, E.A., 122, 149, 150, 349
 Barry, R.A., 219, 252
 Bartholomew, K., 261, 381, 391
 Bartle-Haring, S., 155
 Bartolucci, A.A., 342
 Bartson, E., 179
 Basañez, T., 80, 155
 Basco, M.R., 299
 Basena, M., 348
 Bass, S., 349–50
 Bates, J.E., 85
 Bau, J.J., 338
 Baucom, D.H., 128–29, 131, 299, 374–75, 384
 Bauer, A., 157
 Bauman, K.E., 334–35
 Baumrind, D., 142–45, 149, 152–53, 164, 333
 Bauserman, R., 266, 308
 Bavelas, J.B., 14
 Baxter, L.A., 10, 25, 41–3, 48, 51, 53–4, 56–7, 61, 74, 108–109, 274–75, 277–78
 Baydar, N., 167–68
 Bayer, C.L., 142–43, 150, 153–54, 164
 Bayon, C., 296
 Beach, S.R.H., 132, 135, 295, 299, 300, 324, 327, 329, 371
 Beach, W.A., 327
 Beals, K.P., 94–5, 97
 Bean, F.D., 187
 Beardslee, W.R., 163, 332, 348
 Beaton, J.M., 159, 164
 Beattie, M.C., 314
 Beatty, S.E., 78
 Beaudry, M., 270
 Beavan, J.L., 81, 179–80
 Beavin, J.H., 13–14
 Bebbington, P., 305
 Becker, D.F., 307
 Becker, J.A.H., 265
 Becker, J.C., 23
 Bedford, V.H., 180, 191
 Begin, J., 241
 Begovac, T., 309
 Behlig, J., 252
 Behrens, B.C., 263, 365
 Belanger, C.J., 373
 Belkin, L., 176
 Bell, D.B., 243, 373
 Bell, N.J., 287
 Bellack, A.S., 305–306
 Belli, A.M., 164
 Belsky, J., 229–31
 Benazon, N.R., 300
 Benedict, L.L.W., 354–56
 Bengtson, V.L., 25, 188, 198
 Benjamin, E.J., 321
 Bennett, L.A., 45–6, 52–3, 55–6, 356

- Bennett, S.E., 356
 Bensley, L.S., 317
 Benson, C.S., 317
 Benson, P.R., 132, 241
 Bergen, K.M., 163
 Bergen, M.R., 48, 126
 Bergen, R., 62
 Berger, C.R., 58
 Berger, S.H., 278
 Berk, L.A., 317
 Berkowitz, C.D., 347
 Bernhard, L.A., 366
 Berns, S.B., 359
 Bernas, K.H., 245–46
 Bernstein, B., 69
 Bersamin, M., 338
 Bertoni, A., 252
 Best, C.L., 332, 335
 Best, P., 137
 Bethea, L.S., 198
 Bettinghaus, E.P., 68–9
 Beuhring, T., 309, 312
 Bewell, C., 311
 Biblarz, T.J., 158–59, 161–62
 Biggs, S., 367–68
 Biebl, W., 312
 Biglan, A., 300
 Billette, J.M., 283
 Bingham, C.R., 315
 Birch, J.D., 97
 Birditt, K.S., 197–99
 Biro, F.M., 339
 Bishop, D.S., 20, 60
 Black, K.L., 200
 Blackmore, E., 311
 Blackson, T.C., 333
 Blais, M.C., 270
 Blake, J., 168, 170
 Blalock, J., 295
 Blanchard, M., 368
 Blanchard, V.L., 386
 Blane, H., 314
 Blechman, E.A., 221, 223, 328–29
 Blehar, M.S., 38
 Blieszner, R., 235, 236, 341
 Blizard, R., 368
 Block, J., 333
 Blouin, A.G., 308
 Blouin, J.H., 308
 Blount, R.I., 150
 Blumberg, S.L., 127, 373–74
 Blumer, H., 31–2
 Blumstein, P., 139
 Blundell, J.E., 310
 Bobulinski, M., 374
 Bochner, A.P., 27, 41, 43, 52, 57, 59–60,
 63, 284
 Bodenman, G., 252
 Boergers, J., 300
 Boettcher, T.M.J., 91, 103
 Bohan, S.A., 23
 Bohanek, J., 33
 Bohannon, P., 265
 Bohannon, J.R., 33
 Bohon, S.A., 23
 Boisvert, J.M., 270
 Bolger, N., 236
 Bollman, S.R., 350
 Bolton, C.D., 108
 Bolvin, J.F., 97
 Bonati, F.A., 338
 Bond, M., 363
 Bond, S.B., 363
 Bonell, C., 337
 Bonham, E., 327
 Bonnell, D., 242
 Bonner, R.L., 301
 Bonnesen, J.L., 189
 Bonol, M., 363
 Book, P., 33
 Boon, S.D., 105
 Booth, A., 237, 248, 260–61, 263–64, 334
 Booth, R.J., 64
 Booth-Butterfield, M., 93, 130
 Borduin, C.M., 224
 Bornstein, M.H., 150
 Bornstein, R.F., 352
 Borrero, J.C., 383
 Boss, P.G., 210
 Boster, F.J., 67–8
 Bosticco, C., 58
 Botta, R.A., 311
 Botvin, G.J., 335–35
 Bouchard, G., 232
 Boudreau, J., 232
 Boulterice, B., 289
 Bowlby, J., 37–40, 151
 Boykin, E.L., 349–50
 Boyle, M.H., 348
 Brach, E.L., 261
 Bradau-Brown, F.E., 130
 Bradbury, T.N., 80, 82, 101, 126–27, 128,
 132, 217–18, 225, 230–31, 237, 249, 251–52,
 371, 373
 Braden, C.J., 340
 Braithwaite, D.O., 25, 54, 274–75, 277–79, 283
 Bram, A., 40
 Bramlett, M.D., 247, 250, 259
 Brand, P.A., 366
 Brandes, J.S., 309
 Brandl, C., 308
 Brann, M., 177–79, 199
 Bault, M., 241
 Bravo, A.B., 23
 Bray, J., 270
 Bray, J.H., 271, 287, 289, 335
 Breedlove, M.S., 111
 Brennan, K.A., 96
 Brennan, P.A., 297–98
 Brennan, R.T., 245
 Brent, E.E., 316
 Brezina, T., 351
 Bridges, T.H., 145
 Briere, J., 357

- Briggs, M.L., 174
 Brines, J., 113–14
 Brinig, M., 248
 Bristol, M.M., 211
 Broadwell, S.D., 324
 Brock, G.W., 381, 383
 Brock, R.C., 125
 Brock, R.L., 125, 252
 Broderick, C.B., 26–7, 73, 262
 Brody, G.H., 23, 132, 167, 171
 Bromley, J., 146–47
 Brommel, B.J., 49, 57
 Brook, D.W., 335
 Brook, J.S., 335
 Brooks-Dunn, J., 146, 167–68, 308
 Bross, D.C., 347
 Brown, A.M., 164
 Brown, E., 353
 Brown, F.H., 236
 Brown, G.W., 305
 Brown, J., 297
 Brown, K.L., 337
 Brown, P.C., 323
 Brown, R.A., 190
 Brown-McCabe, D., 105
 Brown-Smith, N., 62
 Bruckner, K.H., 104–105
 Bruess, C. J. S., 54
 Brumbaugh, C.C., 92
 Brunner, H., 379, 386
 Brush, A.J., 187
 Bryant, C.M., 178–80, 200
 Buchanan, C.M., 145, 164
 Buchanan, M.C., 265
 Buckwalter, G., 309–10
 Buehler, C., 84–5, 164, 398
 Buehlman, K.T., 58–9, 61, 118, 134, 256
 Buerkel, R.A., 59
 Buerkel-Rothfuss, N.L., 27
 Bugaighis, M.A., 350
 Buhrmester, D., 168, 171, 176
 Buijzen, M., 78
 Buka, S.L., 296
 Bulik, B.S., 45
 Bullis, C., 108
 Bullo, K., 179
 Bumpass, L.L., 12–13, 112, 250, 269, 271
 Bunde, M., 252
 Burant, P.A., 360
 Burbach, D.J., 352
 Burchinal, M., 232
 Bureau of Justice Statistics, 347
 Burge, D., 298
 Burgess, E.W., 7, 33, 92
 Burgess, R.L., 70
 Burgos, V., 383
 Buriel, R., 173, 231
 Burke, C.T., 236
 Burke, L.K., 366–67
 Burleson, B.R., 97, 107, 125, 223, 241, 298,
 Burman, B., 163–64, 320, 322, 325–26, 361
 Burnett, C.K., 375
 Burns, A., 260
 Burr, W.R., 205, 207, 220
 Burrell, N.A., 285–86
 Burwell, R.A., 174
 Busch, A.L., 352, 364
 Bush, J., 366
 Bush, K.R., 23
 Buss, D.M., 93–4, 96, 110–11
 Butler, M., 381
 Butner, J., 111
 Buunk, B.P., 270
 Buysse, A., 299
 Byers, E.S., 337–38
 Byers, L.A., 361
 Bylund, C., 49, 51, 349
 Byrd, S.E., 117
 Byrne, D., 97–8
- C**
- Cacioppo, J.R., 323–24
 Cafferty, T.P., 243
 Cahn, D.D., 345
 Cairns, A., 333
 Calam, R., 307–309
 Caldera, Y.M., 149
 Call, V.R.A., 113, 269
 Callan, V.J., 39, 160, 242, 314
 Camara, K.A., 261
 Cameron, P., 103, 163
 Campbell, R., 168–70
 Canary, D.J., 79, 82–4, 87, 119, 126, 129
 Canetti, L., 308, 310
 Canfield, L.A., 224
 Cannon, C.A., 326
 Capaldi, D.M., 127
 Caplan, G., 370–71
 Caporalet, L.R., 195
 Carey, C., 100
 Carlson, K.P., 328
 Carlson, T.S., 377
 Carlton, R.P., 328, 352, 364
 Carmalt, J.H., 96
 Carnelley, K.B., 236
 Carpenter, B.D., 340
 Carpenter, K.E., 101
 Carpenter, S., 80
 Carr, A., 113, 309
 Carr, D., 236
 Carrère, S., 68, 118, 127–28, 132, 163, 230–31,
 324, 252, 302, 375
 Carroll, A., 317
 Carson, D.K., 357
 Carson, J.L., 153
 Carstairs, G.M., 305
 Carstensen, L.L., 139–40, 183–84, 324
 Carter, B., 226–28
 Carter, J.C., 311
 Castañeda, E.K., 146
 Castellani, A.M., 122, 238
 Castle, J.D., 104
 Castleton, A., 360
 Castro Martin, T., 13, 269

- Catalano, R.F., 332, 333
 Cate, R.M., 91–2, 101, 106, 108, 242
 Cauble, A.E., 205–06, 219, 221, 331
 Caughlin, J.P., 52, 62–4, 101–102, 117,
 130, 140, 199, 239–40, 242, 251, 256–57,
 286, 342
 Caulfield, C., 349
 Caulkins, R.S., 103
 Cavanaugh, C.R., 327
 Cavanaugh, J.C., 326
 Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 22
 Cernkovich, S.A., 36
 Chadwick, D.L., 347
 Chaffee, S.A., 50
 Chaloner, D.A., 311
 Chambers, S.M., 221
 Chandler, T.A., 361
 Chang, C., 306
 Chappell, K.D., 243
 Chartrand, E., 241
 Chassin, L., 316
 Chavez, F., 314
 Chavoz, L., 252
 Cheadle, J., 262
 Cheah, P., 330
 Cheal, D., 54
 Chee, M.A., 324
 Cheever, N.A., 104
 Chen, V., 31
 Cheng, P.S., 150
 Cheng, S.H., 33
 Cherlin, A.J., 12, 96, 112, 190–92, 194,
 249–50, 273
 Chester, C., 22, 161
 Chiariello, M.A., 298
 Choquet, M., 333
 Christensen, A., 128, 238–39, 270
 Christiansen, E., 383
 Church, E., 277
 Cicirelli, V.G., 166, 169–70, 177–78, 181
 Ciesla, J.A., 298
 Cinamon, G., 245
 Cissna, K.N., 284
 Clair, D.J., 317
 Clark, E., 383
 Clark, G., 346
 Clark, J.J., 349, 350
 Clark, L.A., 53, 56–7
 Clark, M.S., 231
 Clark, R., 20
 Clark-Lempers, D.S., 178
 Clarke, S.C., 269
 Clausell, E., 91, 102
 Clements, M., 21, 101, 117–18, 126, 229,
 230, 237, 252, 374–75
 Cline, F.W., 157
 Clingempeel, W.G., 274, 289
 Clymer, S.R., 243
 Coan, J., 68, 118, 127–28, 256, 324–25
 Cobb, J.A., 230
 Cobb, R.J., 230–31
 Cody, M.J., 68–9
 Cohan, C., 12, 91, 112–14, 218
 Cohen, P., 297
 Cohen, R., 173
 Cohen, S., 223, 322, 339–40, 346
 Cohn, D.A., 40
 Cohn, J.F., 298
 Coleman, M., 7, 13, 166–67, 269–71, 273,
 276, 281–83, 285–87, 289–90
 Coleman, V.E., 367
 Collins, S., 338
 Collins, W.A., 142, 152, 155, 160
 Collins, W.E., 289
 Coltrane, S., 146
 Comeau, J.K., 205–206, 221, 331
 Comello, M.L.G., 334
 Compas, B.E., 317
 Conger, K.J., 195, 222–23
 Conger, R.D., 174, 200, 222–23, 321, 325,
 335, 339, 349
 Connidis, I., 177–78
 Connors, M.E., 311–12
 Constantine, L.L., 15, 26, 29–30, 296
 Contemporary Sexuality, 105
 Contreras, J.M., 353
 Cook, E.C., 85, 145, 398
 Cook, J., 72
 Coombs, R.H., 58
 Cooney, T., 140, 232, 263
 Coontz, S., 46
 Cooper, C., 368
 Cooper, H., 269
 Cooper, M.I., 245
 Cooper, S.M., 116
 Copas, A., 337
 Copeland, J., 332
 Cordova, A., 374
 Cordova, J.V., 118, 238, 359
 Cordy, N.I., 296
 Coren, E., 383
 Cornelius, T.L., 127
 Corrigan, E., 315
 Coryell, W., 299
 Cottle, N., 91, 103
 Coufal, J.D., 351, 381, 383
 Coupland, J., 194
 Coupland, N., 194
 Cowan, C.P., 40, 231, 245
 Cowan, P.A., 40, 60, 205, 231, 245, 277
 Cox, B.J., 352, 357
 Cox, D.E., 284
 Cox, G., 359
 Cox, M.J., 231–32
 Coyne, J.C., 40, 222, 224, 295, 298–300, 327
 Craddock, A., 72
 Craft, S.M., 366
 Crane, D.R., 127, 269
 Cranford, J.A., 315, 327
 Crawford, D.W., 49
 Cremeens, P.R., 149
 Crick, N.R., 176
 Crockett, L.J., 145
 Crohan, S.E., 67

- Cromwell, R.E., 67
 Cronkite, R.C., 224
 Crooks, C.V., 364
 Crosbie-Burnett, M., 270, 286, 288
 Crosby, L., 127
 Crosby, R.A., 338
 Crosnoe, R., 197
 Crouter, A.C., 85, 167, 173, 175–76, 237, 245
 Crowder, K.S., 96, 103
 Crowell, J.A., 86
 Crowther, J.H., 309
 Crumbley, J., 191
 Crumley, L.P., 57–9
 Cui, M., 232
 Cullen, K.L., 246
 Cummings, E.J., 104–105, 164, 239
 Cummings, E.M., 299, 329
 Cunha, A.I., 309–10
 Cupach, W.R., 148
 Curran, P.J., 316
 Cutrona, C.E., 125, 143
 Cutter, H.S.G., 321
 Cvancara, K.E., 51
 Cvitkovic, J., 314
- D**
- Daas, K.L., 163
 D'Agostino, R.B., 321
 Dahl, B., 219
 Dailey, R.M., 154, 316
 Dainton, M., 119–20, 125–26, 129
 Daly, K.J., 46
 Damhorst, M.L., 311
 Dance, F.E.X., 15
 Dandoy, A.C., 350
 Daniel, A.E., 350
 Danziger, S.K., 339
 Danziger, Y., 309
 Darby, P.L., 309
 Dare, C., 308
 Dare, D., 308
 Darrah, C.N., 47
 Darwin, C., 110
 Dass, K.L., 275
 Daugherty, M.K., 315
 Davey, A., 132, 235–36
 David, H., 292
 Davies, A., 111
 Davies, L., 193, 349–50
 Davies, W.H., 383
 Davila, J., 135
 Davis, B., 296
 Davis, E.C., 337
 Davis, J.D., 341
 Davis, K.E., 243
 Dawson, G., 149
 Day, L.E., 297
 Deater-Deckard, K., 193
 DeBoer, D.D., 264
 De Bourdeaudhuij, I., 79
 DeClaire, J., 123–25, 143, 147
 DeClue, T., 328
 Dees, J.E.M.E.G., 349–50
 DeFrain, J., 5–6, 116, 161
 DeGenova, M.K., 5–6, 8
 Dehle, C., 324
 De Jong Gierveld, J., 301–302
 Delamater, A.M., 328–29
 Delia, J.G., 298
 Delworth-Anderson, P., 25
 De Mamani, A.G.W., 305–306
 DeMaris, A., 36, 286
 Demerout, E., 245
 Demir, A., 301
 Demo, D.H., 92, 249, 265, 270
 Demos, S., 308
 Dennerstein, L., 233–34
 Dennis, J., 80, 155
 Dennison, R.P., 264
 Denton, W.H., 241
 Derlega, V.J., 64, 113
 Deveau, V.L., 105
 Devellis, B.M., 321
 Devellis, R.F., 321, 339
 Devine, K.A., 150
 De Young, A.J., 379
 Diamond, G.M., 387
 Diamond, G.S., 387
 Diamond, P., 303
 Dickson, F.C., 8, 13, 15, 29, 33, 57–8, 60–1, 140
 Dickstein, S., 60
 DiClemente, R., 337
 Diener, E., 128
 Diggs, R.C., 21–3
 DiLillo, D., 357
 Dilorio, C.K., 338
 Dilworth-Anderson, P., 25
 Dindia, K., 48
 Dinning, W.D., 317
 Dintcheff, B.A., 333
 Disbrow, M.A., 349
 Dishion, R.J., 174
 Diskin, S., 377
 Dittus, P.J., 336–38
 Dixon, D., 51
 Dixon, L.J., 135
 Dixon, S.V., 146
 Dixon-Woods, M., 343
 Dixson, M.D., 48
 Doane, J.A., 303–304, 306–307
 Dobash, R., 364
 Dobson, K.S., 297
 Dodd, D.K., 317
 Dodge, K.A., 85
 Doerr, H., 349
 Doherty, W.J., 159, 164, 335, 379
 Dohn, F.A., 309, 311
 Dolan, L.M., 328
 Dolbin-MacNab, M.L., 192
 Dollard, M.F., 245
 Domenico, D., 316

Domschke, T.J., 127, 133
 Donaldson, M.A., 357
 Donovan-Kicken, E., 102
 Donenberg, G., 337
 Donnellan, M.B., 232
 Donnelly, B.W., 289
 Donnerstein, C., 100
 Doohan, E.A.M., 163, 256, 302
 Dorer, D.J., 332
 Dorian, M., 306
 Dornbusch, S.M., 146
 Dorsey, S., 338
 Dorros, S.M., 327
 Doss, B.D., 122, 230, 232
 Doucet, F., 22
 Douglas, L.K., 137
 Douglas, M., 53–4
 Downey, G., 299–300
 Downs, K.J.M., 285–87
 Downs, W.R., 352
 Doyle, M., 367–68
 Draucker, C.B., 346, 357
 Drinkmeyer, D., 381
 Driscoll, A.K., 145
 Driver, J., 68
 Drotar, D., 328–29
 Duck, S., 106, 108, 265
 Dudley, E., 233
 Du Fort, G.G., 97
 Duggan, A., 316, 342–43
 Duke, M., 33
 Dumlao, R., 199, 311
 Dun, T., 127
 Dunbar, N., 67, 71
 Duncan, G.J., 259
 Duncan, S.C., 36
 Dunkel-Schetter, C., 123
 Dunleavy, K.N., 130, 172, 178–79
 Dunlop, R., 260
 Dunn, J., 167, 171–72, 193, 289
 Dunn, N.J., 315
 Dunne, K., 140
 Durbin, C.E., 298
 Durham, W.T., 275
 Durik, A.M., 40
 Dush, C.M.K., 299
 Du Toit, C., 290
 Dutton, D.G., 100
 Dyer, G.H., 377
 Dyer, M.A., 103
 Dyer, P.M., 377
 Dykstra, P.A., 113, 302
 Dzankovic, S., 252

E

Eagly, A.H., 108
 Eaker, E.D., 321
 Earls, F., 317
 Eastwick, D.W., 93–5
 Eberly, M., 155
 Ebesu-Hubbard, A.S., 64

Eccles, J.S., 168, 178
 Eckert, S.L., 303
 Eckert, V., 374
 Eckland, B.K., 103
 Eckstein, N., 435
 Edleson, J.L., 380
 Edmonston, B., 96
 Edwards, E.P., 314, 316
 Edwards, H., 341
 Edwards, J.J., 356
 Edwards, J.N., 174, 233–34, 264
 Edwards, M.R., 245
 Edwards, M.S., 332
 Eggebeen, D.J., 158–59
 Eggert, L.L., 102
 Eibesfeldt, I., 149
 Eichenauer, J., 48
 Eiden, R.D., 314, 316
 Eisenberg, E.M., 24, 41, 43, 48, 54
 Eisler, I., 308
 Ekman, P., 124, 153
 El-Bassel, N., 357
 Elbert, J.C., 383
 Elder, G.H., 48, 190–91, 195–97, 325
 Eldridge, A., 351
 Eldridge, K.A., 128
 Elin, R.J., 378–79
 Ellard, J.H., 222
 Ellenberg, A., 349
 Ellingson, J., 311
 Ellingson, L.L., 187–88
 Elliot, D., 34, 357
 Elliot, J.J., 357
 Elliott, T.R., 342
 Ellis, B.J., 298
 Ellis, C., 58, 60
 Ellis, D.A., 315
 Ellis, G.D., 124
 Ellis, J.V., 160
 Ellwanger, P., 155
 Ellwood, M.S., 257
 Eloff, M.E., 383
 El-Sheikh, M., 329
 Elston, C.H., 301
 Elwood, T., 51, 257
 Embry, L., 149
 Endicott, J., 299
 Engl, J., 251, 374–75
 English-Lueck, J.A., 47
 Engstrom, M., 357
 Ennett, S.T., 334–35
 Enns, V., 40
 Enslinger, M.E., 244
 Epstein, N.B., 20, 60, 129
 Erbert, L.A., 108–109
 Erel, O., 163–64
 Erens, B., 367–68
 Erlandson, K.T., 316
 Escalante, K.A., 262
 Eshleman, S., 295, 300
 Espelage, D.L., 312

470 *Author Index*

- Espnes, G.A., 245
 Estrada, A.U., 373
 Etziem, D.L., 245, 312
 Evans, J., 310
 Ewart, C.K., 324
 Eyberg, S.M., 383
- F**
- Faber, A.J., 243
 Fabiano, G.A., 383
 Fagot, F.I., 159
 Fairburn, C.G., 309, 311
 Falkum, E., 245
 Fallon, P., 311
 Fals-Stewart, W., 321
 Farahmand, A., 80, 155
 Farber, E.W., 384–85
 Farhat, T., 334
 Farrell, M.P., 20, 33, 213, 333
 Fasula, A., 338
 Faust, J., 354–55
 Faust, K.A., 249–50
 Fawcett, E.B., 386
 Faxio, E., 252
 Fay, J., 157
 Fearnow, M.D., 221
 Feeney, J.A., 39–40, 80, 92, 118, 129, 132, 230, 242
 Fehr, B., 40
 Feinauer, I.D., 74
 Feinberg, M.E., 171
 Feldt, T., 245
 Felmlce, D., 102
 Felt, J., 104–105
 Fendrich, M., 298
 Ferraro, K.J., 362
 Fey, J., 39
 Fichter, M.M., 308
 Field, T., 298
 Fields, J., 192
 Fields, J.M., 248, 269
 Fiese, B.H., 53–4, 56–8, 60–1
 Fincham, F.D., 132, 135, 238, 260, 371, 373, 375, 384
 Fine, D., 7
 Fine, M.A., 249, 261, 265, 270–71, 281–83, 285–87, 289–90
 Finger, B., 314, 316
 Fingerman, K., 197–98
 Finkel, E.J., 93–5
 Finkenauer, C., 123
 Firman, S.M., 246
 Fisch, R., 207
 Fisher, D.A., 338
 Fisher, L., 91, 341
 Fisher-Nelson, H., 315
 Fishman, H.C., 385–86
 Fishman, T., 385
 Fitzgerald, H.E., 315
 Fitzgerald, K.J., 190
 Fitzgerald, M.M., 164, 356
 Fitzgerald, N.M., 108, 164
 Fitzmaurice, G.M., 296
 Fitzpatrick, M.A., 4, 20, 39, 50–1, 72, 79, 80, 83, 86–7, 124–25, 136–37, 237, 299, 345–46, 361, 378–79, 382–83
 Fivush, R., 33
 Flanagan, K.M., 117, 126
 Flannery-Schroeder, E., 385
 Fleming, A.S., 231
 Fleming, J.E., 348
 Fletcher, A.C., 146
 Flor, D., 23
 Flora, J., 49, 58, 61, 101, 117, 124, 126, 132, 134, 239, 244, 301
 Flores, B., 339
 Florsheim, P., 213, 147, 162
 Floyd, F.J., 101, 315, 373–75
 Floyd, K., 110, 159, 197
 Foa, E., 70
 Foa, U., 70
 Fokkena, T., 302
 Folk-Barron, L., 64
 Follingstad, D.R., 366–67
 Folwell, A.L., 197
 Fonseca, H., 312
 Foot, M.L., 300
 Ford, D.J., 51
 Ford, M.T., 245
 Forehand, R., 338, 382
 Forman, J.D., 327
 Fosco, G.M., 84–5
 Foshee, V.A., 334
 Fossel, R.V., 356
 Foster, S.E., 22, 161
 Fowers, B.J., 376
 Fowler, C., 23, 178–79, 196
 Fowler, F., 147
 Fraenkel, P., 372, 384
 Franck, K.L., 85, 398
 Franck, L.S., 33
 Franco, B., 296
 Frankel, O., 317
 Frankish, C.J., 323
 Franko, D.L., 308
 Frael, D.L., 57–8, 60–1
 Freeman, J.M., 47
 Freeman, P.A., 48
 French, J.P.P., 68
 Freud, S., 37, 295
 Friedberg, R.D., 385
 Friedman, L., 241
 Friedman, L.S., 300
 Friesen, W.V., 124
 Frisby, B.N., 124, 200–201
 Frone, M.R., 245
 Fry, N.E., 134
 Fujioka, Y., 338
 Fukui, R., 147, 162, 213
 Fulkerson, M., 48, 54, 382
 Funderburg, L.G., 303
 Fung, H.H., 184

Fungerman, K.L., 198–99
 Furman, D., 168, 171
 Furman, W., 176
 Furstenberg, F.F., 190–92, 194
 Frye, A.A., 134, 154

G

Gable, S.L., 125, 135
 Gade, P.A., 243
 Gaertner, S.L., 281
 Gaines, S.O., 96
 Gallant, S.J., 40
 Galvin, K.M., 49, 57
 Gamble, W.C., 171–72
 Gano-Phillips, S., 7, 13, 92, 260
 Ganong, L.H., 166–67, 249, 265, 269–71,
 273, 276, 281–83, 285–86, 290
 Garbarino, C., 317
 Garber, J., 298
 Garcia, J.I.R., 306
 Gardner, K.A., 125
 Gardner, R., 366
 Garfinkel, P.E., 309
 Garner, D.M., 309
 Garrigus, A.S., 311
 Garstka, T.A., 195
 Gauthier, A.H., 168–70
 Gauvain, M., 159
 Gazendam-Donofrio, S. 326
 Gee, C.B., 238
 Gee, E.M., 238
 Gelfand, D.M., 309
 Geller, J., 308
 Gelles, R.J., 82, 347–48, 350, 353
 Genest, M., 317
 Genovese, R.J., 378
 Gentlewarrior, S., 366
 Gentry, M., 270
 George, L.J., 49, 101–102, 229, 242
 Georgen, K.E., 117, 237
 Gerard, J.M., 164, 164
 Gerena, M. 185
 Gershoff, E.T., 351–52
 Gerson, K., 47
 Gerstel, N. 185
 Gertz, L.M., 357
 Gesten, E.L., 328
 Ghosh, C.M., 365
 Giaconia, R.M., 310
 Giarrusso, R., 140
 Gibb, B.E., 296–97
 Giberson, R.S., 176
 Giblin, P., 387
 Gibson, M., 171
 Gibson, P.A., 193
 Giesecke, S.L., 303
 Giger, J.N., 342
 Gilbert, D.G., 323
 Gilbert, L., 357
 Giles, H., 194
 Giles-Sims, J., 286

Gill, D.S., 238
 Gill, J.L., 308
 Gilles, V., 171
 Gillespie, N., 309–10
 Gillis-Knox, J., 231
 Gilman, S.E., 296
 Ginott, H.G., 145, 147
 Ginting, J., 300
 Giordano, P.C., 36, 339
 Gitlin, M.J., 303–304
 Giuliani, C., 252
 Giunta, C.T., 317
 Givertz, M., 137, 157–58, 370
 Gladstone, J.W., 190
 Glaser, R., 320, 323–24
 Glass, C.R., 222
 Gleiberman, L., 321
 Glick, J.E., 187
 Glick, P.S., 103, 248
 Gloppen, K.M., 339
 Go, H.L., 383
 Gobrogge, K.L., 111
 Goeke-Morey, M.S., 164
 Goetsch, V.L., 329
 Goetting, A., 181
 Gold, D.T., 180
 Goldberg, A., 91, 102
 Goldberg, A.E., 162–63
 Goldberg, W.A., 159
 Golden, A.G., 159–60
 Goldman, L., 299
 Goldsmith, D., 223
 Goldstein, K., 321
 Goldstein, J.R., 238, 297
 Goldstein, M.J., 303–307
 Golish, T.D., 64, 278–79, 283–84, 286
 Gonso, J., 374
 Gonzaga, G.C., 125
 Gonzalez-Smith, V., 306
 Good, J.S., 327
 Goodboy, A.K., 130, 181
 Goodman, C., 140
 Goodman, C.C., 191
 Goodman, S.H., 164
 Goodnight, J.A., 300
 Goodwin, F.K., 295
 Goodwin, R., 21, 69–70, 73
 Gorall, D., 61
 Gordis, E.B., 353, 359, 365
 Gordon, A.S., 335
 Gordon, C.L., 131
 Gordon, D., 298
 Gordon, J., 306
 Gordon, K.C., 128, 135, 199
 Gordon, L.C., 335, 352
 Gordon, V.V., 336–37
 Gorman-Smith, D., 364–65
 Gosch, E., 385
 Gosselin, J., 290
 Gotcher, J.M., 340
 Gotlib, I.H., 296, 298–99

472 *Author Index*

- Gottlieb, B.H., 223, 340
 Gottman, J. M., 58–9, 61, 68, 72, 81, 114, 118,
 121, 123–24, 126–29, 132, 134–36, 139, 140,
 143, 145, 147–49, 152–53, 156, 166, 229–31,
 238–39, 241, 252–56, 265, 301, 324, 359,
 360, 362–63, 374–75
 Govaerts, K., 48
 Graber, J., 170
 Graber, J.A., 146
 Graell, M., 296
 Graham, E.E., 51, 257
 Graham, J.E., 352
 Gralinski, J.H., 74
 Grant, J., 197, 342
 Gratch, L.V., 366–67
 Gray, C.R., 91, 103
 Gray, M.R., 151
 Greden, J.F., 300
 Greder, K.A., 52
 Greeff, A.P., 123, 258, 290, 326
 Greek, A., 167–68
 Green, A., 348
 Green, K.M., 244
 Green, R.G., 260
 Greenberg, J., 97
 Greene, B.W., 317
 Greene, S.M., 289
 Greenley, R.N., 328
 Greenmuze, 78
 Gregory, A., 151
 Griffin, D.W., 92, 118
 Griffin, W.A., 330, 384
 Griggs, J.J., 326
 Grinwald, S., 287
 Grolnick, W.S., 9, 21, 69, 142, 144, 153, 157,
 160–61
 Gross, P., 279–80, 282
 Grossman, S.F., 368
 Grote, N.K., 231
 Grotevant, H.D., 57–8, 60–1
 Groth, G.E., 110–11
 Grube, J.W., 338
 Grych, J.H., 84–5, 365
 Guarnaccia, P.J., 20
 Gudykunst, W.B., 21–2, 71
 Guenther, V., 312
 Guerney, B.G., 376–77
 Guerrero, L.K., 63–4, 127
 Guiffre, D., 357
 Guilamo-Ramos, V., 338
 Guisinger, S., 277
 Guldner, G.T., 48
 Gurland, S.T., 69, 142, 144, 153, 156–57, 160–61
 Gurman, A.S., 384
 Guthrie, J., 232, 234
 Gutkowski, S.M., 301
 Gutmann, G., 265, 341
 Guttman, J., 252
 Haas, S.M., 119–20, 125–26, 129, 138–39
 Haber, J.R., 314
 Hackel, L.S., 230–31
 Hadley, W., 337
 Haefner, P.T., 238
 Hafen, M., 127, 375
 Hagestad, G.O., 195
 Hahlweg, K., 238, 241, 251, 374–75, 384, 386
 Halberstadt, A., 80
 Hale, D.C., 244
 Hale, J.L., 179
 Hale, W.W., 80
 Halford, W.K., 263, 270, 315, 365
 Hall, J.A., 380, 383
 Hallett, J.S., 316
 Halpern-Meekan, S., 112–13
 Ham, A.Y., 338
 Hamdan-Mansour, A.M., 224
 Hamilton, B.E., 189
 Hamilton, E.B., 298
 Hammen, C.L., 297–98
 Hamon, J.T., 105
 Hanks, H., 355
 Hann, D., 7, 142–44, 149, 156–57
 Hannan, P.J., 309, 312
 Hansell, S., 329
 Hanson, C.L., 20
 Hanson, R.K., 356
 Hanson, T.L., 276
 Hansson, R.O., 236
 Hanzal, A., 127–28, 133, 137, 218, 264, 270
 Happe, S., 383
 Harbach, R.L., 333
 Harburg, E., 321
 Hardey, M., 105–106
 Hareven, T.K., 7
 Harkness, K.L., 297
 Harmon, E.L., 151, 157
 Harold, R.D., 60
 Harper, A.M., 54, 274
 Harper, J.M., 74
 Harralson, T.L., 355–57
 Harrigan, M.M., 60
 Harrington, C.M., 317
 Harris, J.M., 349–50
 Harter, K.S.M., 232, 317
 Harter, S., 354–55, 357
 Harwood, J., 188–89, 194–97
 Haslam, M., 309, 311
 Haslett, B.B., 150–51
 Hassan, H., 116, 251
 Hatfield, E., 95, 110
 Haugland, B.S.M., 55
 Hause, K. S., 126
 Hauser, S.T., 86
 Hautzinger, M., 299
 Havey, J.M., 317
 Hawk, J.D., 80
 Hawkins, A.J., 386
 Hawkins, J.D., 332–33
 Hawkins, M.W., 132
 Hawks, R.D., 335

H

- Ha, J.H., 236
 Haaga, D.A.F., 299.

- Hayes, J., 349
 Haynes, M.T., 110–11
 Hayslip, B., 193
 Hayutim, L., 150
 Hazam, H., 123
 Hazan, C., 39–9
 Hazelton, B.C., 303
 Heavey, C.L., 128
 Hecht, M.L., 196
 Hedlund, S., 308
 Heene, E., 299
 Heffner, K.L., 324
 Heidemann, B., 234
 Heim, M., 300
 Heiman, M., 226, 228
 Heinen, B.A., 245
 Heisler, J.M., 160
 Heller, K., 317
 Helms-Erikson, H., 231
 Heming, G., 231
 Henauw, C., 10
 Henderson, A., 261
 Hendrick, S.S., 117
 Hendrickx, J.J.P., 308
 Henggeler, S.W., 20
 Henry, C., 195
 Henry, D., 343, 364–65
 Henry, R.G., 140, 235
 Henshaw, S.K., 231, 162
 Henwood, P.G., 301
 Heppner, P.P., 317
 Hequembourg, A.L., 33
 Herbert, R., 232
 Herceg-Baron, R.L., 299
 Herderson, C.E., 193
 Herman, A., 349
 Herman, J., 297, 308, 355, 357
 Hernandez, A., 297
 Hernandez, B., 306
 Hernandez, M.A., 367–68
 Herr, N.R., 297
 Herringtonk, R.L., 122
 Herron, K., 361
 Hertenstein, M.J., 149
 Heru, A.M., 341
 Herzog, M.J., 263
 Hetherington, E.M., 260–61, 270, 274, 289
 Hewell, K., 308
 Hewstone, M., 195
 Heyman, R.E., 129, 240, 366
 Heyns, P.M., 383
 Hickie, I.B., 349
 Hicks, K.A., 334–35
 Hicks-Pass, S., 152–53
 Hiebert, J., 373
 Higgins, D.J., 349–50
 Hilsert, A., 309, 311
 Hill, A., 310
 Hill, C.T., 92, 95, 123
 Hill, D.L., 338
 Hill, E., 266
 Hill, R., 208
 Hiller, J.B., 305–306
 Hillhouse, B., 341
 Himawan, L.K., 324
 Hipke, K.N., 306
 Hirokawa, R.Y., 75
 Hiroto, D., 298
 Hirschman, L., 355, 357
 Hirshorn, B.A., 189
 Ho, C., 178
 Hobfoll, S.E., 222
 Hochdorf, Z., 308, 310
 Hochschild, A.R., 47
 Hock, E., 155
 Hocker, J.L., 79
 Hodes, M., 308
 Hockstra, H., 326
 Hoekstra-Weebers, J., 326
 Hofferth, S.J., 46–8, 54
 Hoffman, J.A., 80
 Hoffman, K.L., 174
 Hoffman, N., 299
 Hoffman, S.D., 259
 Hofstede, G., 22, 71
 Hofstein, Y., 249
 Holahan, C.J., 224
 Holcomb, W.R., 350
 Holden, G.W., 145
 Holland, R., 103
 Hollenbeck, B.E., 349
 Holm, K.E., 228
 Holman, T.B., 91, 126
 Holmes, J.G., 92, 118
 Holtzman, M., 9
 Holtzworth-Munroe, A., 239, 360–61
 Hölzl, E., 78
 Homme, J.H., 311
 Honeycutt, J.M., 109, 257
 Hoogendoorn, A.W., 301
 Hooker, K.A., 54, 57, 60
 Hooley, J., 238, 241, 305–306, 322
 Hooven, C., 145, 147–48, 152–53, 156
 Hopkins, J., 298
 Hops, H., 36, 296, 300
 Horesh, N., 309
 Horne, J., 368
 Hornyak, L.M., 132, 241
 Horowitz, L.M., 38–9
 Horrocks, J., 116, 251
 Hosman, C., 375
 Hoste, R.R., 308
 Houran, J., 104–105
 House, J.S., 340
 House, L.D., 339
 Houser, R.F., 261
 Houts, R.M., 49, 95–7, 101–102, 130, 229, 242, 251, 256–57, 317
 Howard, M.C., 335
 Howe, N., 168, 174, 176
 Howells, K., 311
 Hsiung, R.O., 78
 Huang, I.C., 210
 Huber, F.N., 261

474 *Author Index*

- Hudson, J.L., 385
 Hughes, D.K., 108–109
 Hughes, F.M., 135
 Hughes, H.M., 356
 Hughes, M., 295, 300
 Huizinga, G., 326
 Hulsey, T.L., 20, 354–57
 Hulsman, D., 10
 Humfress, H., 311
 Hummert, M.L., 189, 195, 198, 341
 Hummon, N., 315
 Humphrey, L.L., 308, 310
 Hunn, S.C.P., 334
 Hunsley, J., 356
 Hunt, S., 252
 Hunter, A.G., 192
 Hussain, M., 327
 Huston, T.L., 49, 70, 91, 95–7, 101–102,
 109–110, 117, 130, 229–31, 237–38, 240, 242,
 251, 256–57
 Hutchinson, M.K., 336
 Hutchinson, S., 262, 265, 273
 Hyde, J.S., 30
 Hyle, P., 40, 167–68
- I**
 Iafrate, R., 252
 Iannotti, R.J., 334, 349
 Ickes, W., 83
 Ifert, D.E., 63–4
 Impett, E.A., 135
 Infante, D.A., 361
 Inkpen, K.M., 187
 Innstrand, St.T., 245
 Insgoldby, B.B., 25
 Iqbal, A., 341
 Ireland, M., 312
 Irwin, S., 23
 Isaacs, L., 387
 Ishai, J., 309
 Iverson, A., 100
- J**
 Jaccard, J., 336–38
 Jackman-Cram, S., 299
 Jackson, D.D., 13–14
 Jackson H., 324, 329
 Jackson, J., 354, 356–57
 Jackson-Newsom, J., 145
 Jacob, T., 295, 298–99, 314–17
 Jacobs, J.A., 47
 Jacobson, J., 100
 Jacobson, N.S., 359, 360, 362–63, 384
 Jacobvitz, D.B., 56
 Jacquart, M., 126
 Jaffe, P.G., 364
 Jakubowski, S.F., 379, 386
 James, C.M., 301
 James, L., 79
 James, S., 20
 Jamieson, K., 373
 Janicke, C., 298
 Jarvis, T.J., 332
 Jason, L.A., 332
 Jencius, M., 54, 151
 Jenkins, J.H., 306
 Jenkins, N.H., 374
 Jenkins, W.R., 383
 Jewel, J.D., 297
 Jimenez, J., 192
 John, R.S., 97, 361, 365
 Johnson, A., 337
 Johnson, C., 112, 161, 373
 Johnson, C.L., 186–87, 236
 Johnson, D., 260
 Johnson, D.P., 301, 390
 Johnson, D.R., 237, 288
 Johnson, H.D., 301
 Johnson, J.G., 297
 Johnson, M.D., 232, 237–38
 Johnson, M.P., 117, 362
 Johnson, P., 317
 Johnson, S.B., 383
 Johnson, S.L., 298–99, 316–17
 Johnson, V., 333, 335
 Joiner, T., 295
 Jonason, P., 96
 Jones, A.C., 275
 Jones, D.C., 317
 Jones, D.J., 22, 161, 324, 329
 Jones, J., 128
 Jones, J.E., 303–304, 306
 Jones, M., 298
 Jones, S., 62, 64
 Jones, S.M., 272
 Jones, W.H., 301
 Jones, W.P., 333
 Jorgenson, J., 52, 57, 60
 Jorgensen, S.R., 377
 Joseph, J.I., 122
 Josephs, K., 53–4
 Jouriles, E.N., 299
 Joy, C.B., 205–206, 219, 221
 Joyner, K., 113–14
 Juby, H., 283
 Judd, L.J., 299
 Julien, D., 241
 Julius, M., 321
 Juon, H.S., 244
 Juresa, V., 309
 Jurish, A.P., 350
 Jurkovich, G.J., 261
 Jusczyk, P.W., 150
- K**
 Kachadourian, L.K., 314, 316
 Kaciroti, N., 321
 Kafka, R.R., 334
 Kahn, J., 299
 Kam, J.A., 196
 Kamo, Y., 185, 192
 Kamsner, S., 357
 Kandel, D.B., 333, 335
 Kanoy, K.W., 232

- Kaplan, D.W., 339
 Kaplan, M., 79
 Kaplan, S.J., 23, 349
 Karimiha, G., 300
 Karney, B.R., 58, 82, 96, 101, 125–26, 131,
 133–34, 217–18, 225, 228, 237–38, 249, 251
 Karno, M., 306
 Karos, S.J., 245
 Karpel, M.A., 62
 Kashani, J.H., 224, 350, 352
 Kaslow, F.W., 244, 384–85
 Kaslow, N.J., 384–85
 Katz, L.F., 58–9, 61, 134, 145, 147–48, 152–53,
 156, 166, 256
 Kaufman, J., 353
 Kavanagh, K., 159
 Kawachi, I., 296
 Kawash, G., 20
 Kaye, W.H., 310
 Keelan, J.P.R., 40
 Keijsers, L., 80
 Keiley, M.K., 192
 Keith, B., 258, 260, 259
 Kell, H., 337
 Kellas, J.K., 58–9, 61, 285
 Keller, H., 149
 Keller, M.B., 332
 Kellermann, K., 98
 Kellner, H., 58
 Kelly, A.B., 315, 371, 373, 375, 384
 Kelly, B., 146–47
 Kelly, C., 101, 242
 Kelly, H., 70
 Kelly, J., 270
 Kelly, K.J., 334
 Kelly, L., 316
 Kelly-Hayes, M., 321
 Kendall, P.C., 385
 Kendall-Tackett, K., 297
 Kandler, K.S., 295, 300
 Kendrick, C., 171
 Kennedy, S., 320
 Kenny, M.C., 354–55
 Kenrick, D.T., 110–11
 Kenworthy, J., 195
 Kenyon, D.B., 288
 Kerig, P.K., 308
 Kerns, R.D., 326
 Kessler, R.C., 295, 300
 Kichler, J.C., 309
 Kidd, A.H., 366
 Kiecolt, J., 174
 Kiecolt-Glaser, J.K., 320–25
 Kiernan, N.E., 79
 Kiesler, S., 301
 Kilpatrick, D.G., 367–68, 332, 335
 Kim, C., 78
 Kim, H.K., 23, 127, 337
 Kim, J.L., 337
 Kim-Appel, D., 222
 Kimberly, J.A., 224
 King, V., 186, 193, 196, 262
 Kinnuhun, U., 245
 Kinzl, J.F., 311
 Kirby, J.B., 189
 Kirchler, E., 48, 78, 309
 Kirkpatrick, L.A., 93
 Kitzmann, K.M., 173
 Klein, A., 356
 Klein, D.M., 25, 29, 31
 Klein, M., 152
 Klein, R.C.A., 102
 Klein, S.R., 205, 207, 220
 Kleinbaum, S., 11, 91, 112, 114
 Kleparchuk, C., 168–70
 Klessinger, N., 92
 Kliever, W., 221
 Kline, G.H., 374, 250
 Klockow, L.L., 365
 Klump, K.L., 111
 Kluwer, E.S., 232
 Knablach, L.K., 98, 100–102
 Knapp, M.L., 94, 97–9, 265
 Knock, S.L., 161, 270
 Knoester, C., 158–59
 Knudsen, D.D., 347, 350, 353
 Knutson, L., 376
 Kochal, R.B., 244
 Koh-Rangarajoo, E., 40
 Koerner, A.F., 50–1, 72, 80, 86–7, 125, 262,
 264, 288
 Koesten, J., 51
 Kog, E., 307
 Kohn, M.L., 51
 Koopman, C., 327
 Koopmans, M., 355–56
 Kopelowicz, A., 306
 Kopp, C.B., 74
 Koppel, N., 105
 Korn, M., 288
 Kosarek, J.A., 383
 Kosberg, J.I., 368
 Kotary, L., 54, 57, 60
 Kotchick, B.A., 338, 382
 Kotrba, L.M., 245
 Kouros, C.D., 240, 299
 Kovach, S., 342
 Kovess, V., 97
 Kowal, A., 176
 Kowner, R., 94
 Kozeluk, L., 20
 Kraemer, H.C., 324
 Krahn, G.L., 314
 Krainz, S., 330
 Kramer, L., 166, 174–76
 Kraut, R., 301
 Krcmar, M., 152
 Kreider, R.M., 248, 269
 Kroger, J., 299, 309–10
 Krokoff, L., 134, 238–39
 Krouse, S., 265, 273, 245–46
 Krull, J.L., 176
 Kuersten-Hogan, R., 164
 Kuhnert, M.E., 309

476 *Author Index*

- Kuipers, L., 305
 Kunkel, A., 97, 107, 298
 Kunovac, J.L., 299
 Kuo, W.H., 33
 Kurdek, L.A., 92, 95, 138–39, 230–31,
 237–38, 261
 Kuvalanka, K., 91, 102
 Kymalainen, J.A., 304–306
- L**
- L'Abate, L., 371–72, 378
 Labouvie-Vief, G., 40
 Labrecque, J., 78
 Labruna, V., 349
 Lacey, J.H., 311
 Lachman, M.E., 224, 340
 Laerum, K.T., 375
 Lahey, B.B., 349
 Lai, D., 368
 Lakey, S.G., 83–4
 Lambert, C.H., 245
 Lambert, W., 355–57
 Lamborn, S.D., 146
 Landford, J.C., 261
 Landis, K.R., 340
 Landsberger, S.A., 39
 Lang, F.R., 184
 Lang, M., 230
 Langballe, G.M., 245
 Lange, R., 104–105
 Langer, A., 219
 Langer, N., 188
 Langleamer, K.L., 245
 Langsford, J.E., 85
 Lansdale, D., 235
 La Plante, B., 283
 LaRossa, R., 31–2
 Larsen, A., 91, 331, 376
 Larsen, J., 91, 271
 Larzelere, R.E., 152
 Lasegue, E.C., 295
 La Taillade, J.J., 362–63
 Latzer, Y., 152, 308, 310
 Laumann, E.O., 367–68
 Launier, R., 209
 Laurenceau, J., 118, 122, 374
 Lauretti, A., 164
 Laursen, B., 142, 152, 155, 160
 LaValley, A.G., 128
 Lavee, Y., 205, 212, 216
 LaVoie, J.C., 301
 Lavori, P.W., 332
 Law, T.C., 260
 Lawrence, E., 125, 219, 230–33, 252
 Lawton, L., 177, 198
 Lazarus, R.S., 209, 221
 Le, B., 356
 Leber, B.D., 373
 Le Bourdais, C., 283
 LeBreton, J.M., 245
 LeClair-Underberg, C., 285
 Ledbetter, A.M., 148, 262, 297
 Lederer, G.S., 228
 Ledoux, S., 333
 Lee, C.K.C., 78
 Lee, C.M., 21–2, 71, 298
 Lee, H., 78
 Lee, J.W., 151–52, 156
 Lee, M., 368–69
 Lee, S., 332
 Lee, S.A., 262
 Lee, S.M., 96
 Lee, V., 364
 Leeds-Hurwitz, W., 53–4, 56, 59
 Leekam, S.R., 173
 Leff, J.P., 205, 305
 Le Grange, D., 308, 310
 Lehman, S.J., 262
 Leigh, G., 379
 Leitsch, S.A., 367–68
 Lempers, J.D., 178
 Leon, A.C., 56
 Leon, K., 272
 Leonard, K.E., 127, 314–17
 Lepkifker, E., 309
 Le Poire, B.A., 309, 316
 Lerner, R.M., 6
 Lescano, C.M., 337
 Leslie, L.A., 377
 Lester, M.E., 379
 Letellier, P., 366–67
 Leung, F.Y.K., 308
 Leve, C., 159
 Levenson, R.W., 124, 139, 140, 238–39, 252,
 255, 324
 Levin, S.A., 20, 60, 91
 Levine, P., 309
 Levine, T.R., 67–8
 Levy, S.Y., 263
 Lewandowski, A., 328
 Lewinsohn, P.M., 296, 298, 300
 Lewis, J., 228, 340
 Li, N.P., 111
 Li, S., 348
 Lichtenstein, E., 322
 Lie, G.Y., 366
 Lieberman, M.A., 341
 Liebman, R., 330
 Light, K.C., 324
 Lilenfeld, L.R., 310
 Lillis, K., 330–31
 Lim, J., 330–31
 Lin, J.Y., 20
 Lin, K.H., 352
 Lin, L.W., 104
 Lin, M.C., 188–89, 196–97
 Lindahl, K., 229–30, 237
 Linden, M., 299
 Linden, W., 323
 Lindsey, E.W., 149
 Line, R., 78
 Linker, J.S., 260
 Litowitz, D.L., 103
 Little, R.L., 191

- Litzinger, S.C., 135
 Liu, H., 320
 Liu, T., 349–50
 Livesay, L.B., 10
 Livingston, G., 368
 Lloyd, S., 91–2, 359–60
 Lobdell, J., 301
 Locke, B.Z., 295
 Locke, H., 7
 Lockwood, R.L., 173
 Loeber, R., 333
 Lohfeld, L., 368
 London, P.333, 334
 Long, N., 338
 Long, P.J., 296–97, 357
 Longabaugh, R., 301
 Longman, A.J., 340
 Longmore, M.A., 339
 Lonigan, C.J., 383
 Lopata, H., 181, 199
 Lopez, A.M., 327
 Lopez, S.R., 306
 Lopoo, L.M., 244
 Lorenz, F.O., 322, 325
 Lormand, D., 339
 Louden, L., 193
 Loving, T.J., 324–25
 Low, B., 339
 Lteif, A.N., 311
 Lu, H., 112
 Lucas, R.E., 128
 Lucey, H., 171
 Luckey, I., 186
 Luk, J.W., 334
 Luke, D.A., 356, 356
 Lumley, M.N. 297
 Lundberg, O., 329
 Lundeberg, K., 352, 364
 Lundmark, V., 301
 Lundy, M., 368
 Lupfer, S.L., 354, 357
 Lussier, G., 193
 Luz, C.C., 235
 Lye, D.N., 285
 Lynch, B.M., 327
 Lynch, E.W., 22
 Lyons, J.M., 285
 Lyons, R.F., 222
 Lyster, R.F., 373, 377
 Lyvers, M., 332
- M**
- MacBrayer, E.K., 308
 MacCallum, R.C., 324
 Maccoby, E.E., 142, 153
 MacDermid, S.M., 230–33, 243
 MacDonald, W.L., 286
 Mace, D.R., 377
 MacKennon, S.L., 105
 MacLeamy, J.B., 327
 MacMillian, H., 352, 357, 368
 MacNeil, G., 368
 Madison, K.J., 145
 Madsen, L., 252
 Madu, S.N., 355
 Magruder, B., 366–67
 Magsamen-Conrad, K., 100
 Maguire, K.C., 48, 103, 346
 Mahoney, M., 301
 Mahurin, R.K., 303
 Maisto, S.A., 314
 Major, D.A., 245–46
 Makela, S., 341
 Malarkey, W.B., 323–25
 Malcore, S.A., 266
 Malherbe, H.L., 123
 Malia, J.A., 205
 Malik, N.M., 129, 240
 Malkus, B.M., 332, 335
 Mallinckrodt, B., 311–12, 356
 Mallinger, J.B., 326
 Malnil, M., 309
 Malone, J., 328
 Mancini, J.A., 48, 235–36
 Mandel, F., 349
 Manderscheid, R.W., 295
 Manne, S., 326–27
 Manning, W.D., 112, 339
 Mansson, D.H., 197
 Manthorpe, J., 367–68
 Manzeske, D.P., 157
 Mao, H.Y., 324
 Mapp, S.C., 356
 Mares, M., 181, 235–36
 Margand, N.A., 232
 Margolin, G., 299, 320, 322, 325–26, 353, 359, 361, 365, 384
 Margulis, S.T., 123
 Marjinsky, K.A.T., 61
 Markey, P.M., 98
 Markham, C.M., 339
 Markides, K.S., 300
 Markman, H.J., 21, 80, 101, 112, 114, 117–18, 126–27, 229–30, 232, 237–38, 241–42, 250–52, 264, 372–75, 384, 386
 Markowitz, F.E., 364
 Markson, S., 56
 Marshal, M.P., 316
 Marshall, L.L., 352, 361
 Marshall, P.D., 300, 310
 Martin, B., 384
 Martin, J.A., 147, 162
 Martin, J.I., 316
 Martin, M.J., 350
 Martin, M.M., 172, 175, 178–80
 Martin, N.G., 309–10
 Martin, R., 299
 Martina, L.M.L., 308
 Marx, B.P., 296–97
 Marx, J., 191
 Maser, J.D., 299
 Massachusetts Medical Society Committee on Violence, 347
 Matias, R., 298

- Matthews, K.A., 329
 Matthews, T.J., 189
 Maughan, D.R., 383
 Mayselless., O., 261
 Mazur, M.A., 64
 Mazzeo, S.E., 311
 McBurney, D.H., 188
 McCabe, M.P., 349–50, 357
 McCabe, P., 379
 McCabe, S.B., 299
 McCann, C., 213
 McCart, M.R., 383
 McCarthy, D.M., 308
 McCarty, F., 338
 McClarty, K.L., 323
 McClintic, K.M., 270, 288
 McCoy, K., 167
 McCrady, B.S., 315
 McCrary, C., 23
 McCreary, B.A., 311, 312
 McCubbin, H.I., 205–206, 209–13, 215–16, 219, 221
 McCullough, P.G., 233–34
 McDonald, R.M., 145
 McGeorge, C.R., 377
 McGinnis, S.L., 112
 McGoldrick, M., 226–28
 McGonagle, K.A., 295, 300
 McGrane, D., 309
 McHale, J.P., 9, 21, 164, 167, 171, 173, 176
 McHale, S.M., 85, 175, 230–31, 237, 245
 McIntosh, D.E., 383
 McIntyre-Smith, A., 364
 McIver, L.S., 328
 McKay, G., 381
 McKay, J.R., 314
 McKee, J., 189
 McKenry, P.C., 208–210, 289
 McKibben J.N., 249–50
 McKinney, C., 159–61
 McLanahan, S.S., 276
 McLeer, S.V., 347
 McLeod, J.M., 50
 McMahan, P.M., 356
 McMahan, R.J., 317
 McManus, T., 262
 McNamara, G., 221, 223
 McNeal, J.U., 78
 McNulty, J.K., 96, 131, 133, 228
 McPherson, K., 348
 McPherson, M., 349–50
 McQueen, A., 335
 Mead, G.H., 31–2
 Mechanic, D., 329
 Medved, C.E., 245
 Medway, F.J., 243
 Meehan, J.C., 361
 Meehan, J.M., 200
 Meek, P., 327
 Meeks, S., 222
 Meeus, W., 80
 Meezon, W., 162
 Meier, K., 88
 Meijer, A.M., 78, 331
 Melton, G.G., 9
 Menchaca, D., 324
 Mendelsohn, G.A., 105
 Mendelson, J.H., 313
 Menees, M.M., 211, 222, 224, 317
 Meredith, W.H., 351, 361, 365
 Merikangas, K.R., 97
 Merolla, A., 48, 92, 104
 Messerly, L., 241
 Messman-Moore, T.L., 311, 357
 Mettenburg, J., 348
 Metts, S., 123
 Metzler, A.E., 317
 Meyer, C., 309, 311
 Meyers, S.A., 39
 Meyerson, L.A., 296–97
 Michel, J.S., 245
 Mickelson, K.D., 222
 Micklethwait, J., 160
 Mickus, M.A., 235
 Miculincer, M., 309
 Middleton, K.A., 352, 364
 Mietzner, S., 104
 Mihalic, S.W., 36
 Mikkelson, A.C., 166, 179, 180–81
 Miklowitz, D.J., 302–304, 306
 Mikulincer, M., 39
 Milardo, R.M., 102
 Milevsky, A., 172, 178
 Miley, M., 104–105
 Milholland, T.A., 377, 379
 Milkie, M.A., 231
 Millar, F.E., 130
 Miller, A.E., 266
 Miller, A.L., 274, 303
 Miller, B.A., 352
 Miller, B.D., 330–31
 Miller, G.R., 97
 Miller, J.E., 25
 Miller, J.L., 347, 350, 353
 Miller, J.P., 328
 Miller, J.Y., 332–33
 Miller, K.I., 341
 Miller, K.S., 338
 Miller, L., 197–98
 Miller, L.E., 101
 Miller, M., 297
 Miller, N.B., 231
 Miller, P., 333
 Miller, P.A., 221
 Miller, R.B., 140, 379, 386
 Miller, S., 379–80
 Miller-Day, M., 151–52, 156, 197
 Milmann, L., 330
 Milne, E.P., 379, 386
 Milner, J.S., 349–50
 Min, M., 332
 Miner, E.J., 111
 Minkler, M., 190, 192
 Minnes, S., 332

- Minnett, A.M., 167
 Minouni, M., 309
 Mintz, J., 305
 Mintz, S., 160
 Minuchin, S., 307, 330, 385
 Miranda, R., 296–97
 Mirowsky, J., 321
 Mishel, M.M., 340
 Mitchell, B.A., 11, 122, 232
 Mitchelson, J.K., 245
 Mitnick, D.M., 129, 240
 Modi, A.C., 328
 Modry-Mandell, K.L., 171
 Molinari, E., 328
 Molnar, D.S., 314, 316
 Monck, E.M., 305
 Mongeau, P.A., 100
 Monnier, J., 222
 Montagne, M., 366
 Montel, K.H., 376
 Montgomery, J.L., 383
 Montgomery, M.J., 289
 Montgomery, N., 158
 Montgomery, R.J.V., 341
 Montie, J.E., 327
 Montoya, M.R., 96
 Mood, D.W., 327
 Moore, D., 147, 162, 213, 365
 Moore, M.M., 99
 Moore, T.L., 301
 Moorehead, D.J., 310
 Moos, B.S., 312
 Moos, R.H., 224, 317
 Moreau, D., 298
 Morell, M.A., 323–24
 Morgan, A.G., 377
 Morgan, M., 272
 Morgan, W.M., 349
 Morman, M.T., 159, 197
 Morr, M.C., 62, 64
 Morrell, R., 261
 Morse, C.R., 64, 262, 311–12
 Mortimer, J.T., 232
 Mosher, W.D., 247, 250, 259
 Mosley, J., 276
 Moszkowski, R.J., 150
 Mottarella, K.E., 106
 Mount, J.H., 296
 Mountford, U., 309, 311
 Mounts, N.S., 146
 Mueller, M.M., 190–91, 195–96
 Mueller, T.L., 299
 Mufson, L., 298
 Muir, D.W., 150
 Mukopadhyay, T., 301
 Mullins, L.C., 301, 390
 Mulryn, L., 252
 Mulvancy-Day, N., 20
 Murdock, G.P., 7
 Murphy, C.M., 314
 Murnen, S.K., 311
 Murray, C.I., 109, 236
 Murray, J., 72
 Murray, S.L., 92, 118
 Murstein, B.I., 95–6, 106–108
 Mutsaer, W., 270
 Muzzy, W., 367–68
 Myers, S.A., 93, 177–79, 181, 197, 199
- N**
- Nabi, R.L., 228
 Nadelman, L., 169
 Nagalakshmi, S.V., 314
 Narang, D.S., 353
 Narrow, W.E., 295
 Nash, M.R., 335–37
 Nash, S.G., 335
 National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, 347
 National Center for Health Statistics, 247–48
 National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information, 347
 Needle, R.H., 205–06, 219, 221
 Neeliyara, T., 314
 Neeren, A.M., 296–97
 Neff, L.A., 96, 125, 133
 Neimeyer, R.A., 354–57
 Nelson, B.S., 117, 237
 Nelson, C., 295, 300
 Nesse, R., 236
 Neuchterlein, K.H., 303–305, 307
 Neugarten, B.L., 190
 Neuliep, J.W., 71–2
 Neumark-Sztainer, D., 309, 312
 Nevin, R.S., 331
 Newcomb, T.M., 97
 Newman, B.M., 289
 Newman, J.L., 9
 Newpauer, N.C., 175
 Newswise, 78
 Newton, T., 309, 321, 323–25
 Nichols, M.P., 84
 Nicholson, J.H., 270, 277–78
 Nicklas, J.J., 327
 Niehuis, S., 91, 109–10, 242
 Noel, N.E., 314–15
 Noller, P., 20, 39, 40, 79, 80–3, 118, 124, 129, 132, 142–43, 155, 160, 230, 240–42, 383
 Nomaguci, K.M., 231
 Nomura, Y., 296, 298
 Normand, E.L., 274, 285
 Norris, A.M., 349
 North, R.J., 224
 Northey, S., 330
 Northouse, L.L., 327, 342
 Northouse, P.G., 342
 Norton, T.R., 327
 Norwood, H.S., 10
 Notarius, C.I., 72, 101, 132, 222, 229, 238, 241
 Nowicki, S., 353
 Nugent, J., 241
 Nunnally, E.W., 379–80
 Nussbaum, E., 138
 Nussbaum, J.F., 23, 189, 198, 236

480 *Author Index*

- Nuttall, P.E., 383
Nuzzo, C., 150
- O**
Oakley, A., 337
O'Brien, M., 306
O'Connor, T.G., 260
Oertwein, M., 381, 383
Oetzel, J.G., 129
O'Farrell, T., 314, 322
Offord, D.R., 317, 348
Ogle, J.P., 310
Ogrocki, P., 325
O'Hair, H.D., 265
O'Hanlon, J., 309
O'Hearn, R.E., 243
Ohr, J.K., 148
Ohr, S.K., 297
Ohs, J., 261
Oishi, S., 128
O'Leary, K.D., 299
O'Leary, S.G., 351, 366
Oliver, J.E., 353
Olmos-Gallo, P.A., 250, 374-75
Olson, D.H., 15-21, 116, 165, 205-206, 212, 215-17, 220, 308, 376
Olson, K.L., 301
Olson, L.N., 5-6, 64-5, 148, 161, 278-79
Olson, S., 67
Olson, S.O., 79
Olympia, D., 383
O'Mara, E.M., 133
Oppenheimer, L., 331
Oppenheimer, R., 310, 311
O'Rand, A.M., 234
Orbuch, T.L., 116, 251
Orford, J., 317
Oriña, M., 83
Orrego, V.O., 87
Orthner, D.K., 48
Orvaschel, H., 298
Osgood, D.W., 173
Osteen, V., 300
Ostrander, R., 297
Oswald, R.F., 57, 91, 102-103
Ovide, S., 105
- P**
Padilla, A., 192
Padilla-Walker, L.M., 80
Pagani, L., 289
Pai, A.L.H., 328
Pakenham, K.I., 327
Palazzolo, K.E., 352
Paley, B., 231-32
Palmer, R.L., 309-11
Palmer, S.C., 299
Pandina, R.J., 333, 335
Paolini, S., 195
Papernow, P., 273
Papousek, H., 150
Papousek, M., 150
Papp, L.M., 164, 240, 299
Paradis, A.D., 310
Parent, C., 270
Park, T.S.K., 298
Parke, R.D., 146, 153, 162, 173
Parker, G., 349
Parker, H., 355
Parker, S., 355
Parks, M.R., 22, 102
Parrella, J., 330
Parrott, L., 377
Pashos, A., 188
Pasley, K., 285
Pasupathi, M., 140
Patchner, M.A., 349-50
Patrick, B.C., 38-9, 120, 122-23, 126
Patterson, C.J., 162
Patterson, G.R., 174-75
Patterson, J.M., 205-206, 209-15, 219, 221, 331
Patterson, M., 301
Patterson, M.L., 124
Patton, S.R., 328
Pauk, N., 285-87
Paul, M., 62
Paulus, M., 299
Pavalko, E.K., 48
Payne, C.C., 231
Pearce, W.B., 14, 31
Pearl, D., 323
Pearlin, L.I., 40
Pearson, J.C., 54
Pecchioni, L.L., 342
Peck, .K., 300
Pederson, A., 252
Peck, C.W., 287, 300
Pelcovitz, D., 349
Pelham, W.E., 383
Pellegrini, D.S., 291
Pemberton, M., 334-35
Pennebaker, J.W., 64, 103
Peplau, L.A., 92, 94-5, 97, 123, 135, 300
Peri, G., 328
Perkins, P.S., 111
Perlman, D., 300-301
Perlman, M., 80
Penke, L., 93
Perner, J., 173
Perosa, L.M., 20, 155
Perosa, S.L., 20, 155
Perry, A.R., 186
Perry, J., 340
Perse, E.M., 51
Perzacki, R., 309
Peskin, M.F., 339
Peter, J., 104
Peterson, C., 328
Peterson, G.W., 5, 7, 13, 142-44, 149, 156-57
Peterson, L., 357
Petrella, J.N., 374
Petrie, K.J., 64
Petronio, S., 62-4, 123, 286
Petta, I., 348

- Pettit, G.S., 85
 Piaget, J., 151
 Pianna-Waggoner, C., 328
 Pichler, S., 246
 Pike, K.M., 309–11
 Pilowsky, D.J., 296, 298
 Pink, J.E.T., 287
 Piquart, M., 301
 Pinsof, W.M., 112, 248
 Piotrowski, C., 245
 Piper, J., 61
 Pistella, C.L.Y., 338
 Pite, J.M., 299
 Pittman, G., 109
 Pitts, J.S., 23, 325–26
 Planalp, S., 109
 Plant, M., 333
 Ploeg, J., 368
 Plotnicov, K., 310
 Pluhar, E.I., 338
 Plutchik, A., 219–21
 Plutchik, R., 219–21
 Poehlmann, J., 244
 Polivy, J., 308
 Polk, D.M., 341
 Pollak, S.D., 353
 Pollane, L., 377
 Pollice, C., 310
 Polo, A.J., 306
 Polonko, K.A., 248
 Poltrock, S., 53–4
 Pomerantz, E.M., 156
 Ponzetti, J.J., 301
 Popenoe, D., 5, 9, 116, 134
 Portney, M.J., 21, 117, 126
 Pouquette, C., 164
 Powell, H., 337
 Powers, S.W., 328
 Prado, L.M., 242, 374
 Prager, K.J., 298
 Prentice, L., 200
 Prescott, M.E., 309
 Presser, H.B., 48
 Price, S.J., 208–10
 Priestler, P.E., 383
 Prinz, R.J., 317
 Project STYLE Study Group, 337
 Prusank, D.T., 147
 Prusoff, B.A., 97, 299
 Pryor, J., 234
 Puentes-Neuman, G., 308
 Pulkkinen, L., 245
 Punyanunt-Carter, N.M., 159
 Pusker, K., 224
 Pyke, K., 71–2
- Q**
 Quadflieg, N., 308
- R**
 Rabby, M.K., 106
 Racine, Y.A., 348
 Rack, J.J., 349
 Radey, C., 175
 Rae, D.S., 295
 Ragland, L., 375
 Ragsdale, D., 130
 Rainey, D.Y., 339
 Raley, R.K., 13, 271
 Ram, A., 175
 Rameshm, S., 330
 Randall, D. W., 21, 117, 126
 Rangarajan, S., 316
 Rankin, C.A., 288
 Ranlett, G., 303–304
 Ransford, C.R., 245
 Rantanen, J., 245
 Rao, R., 310
 Rasmussen, J.L., 164
 Rauen, P., 373
 Raven, B., 68
 Rawiel, U., 23
 Ray, K.C., 354
 Ray, R., 314
 Recchia, H.E., 174
 Reed, J.T., 100
 Regan, P., 91
 Regier, D.A., 295
 Rehm, R.S., 33
 Rehman, U., 240, 300, 361
 Reich, W., 317
 Reid, J.B., 174
 Reid, J.C., 224
 Reidmann, A., 167
 Reifman, A., 259, 333
 Reinherz, H.Z., 310
 Reis, B.F., 387
 Reis, H.T., 38–9
 Reiss, D., 46, 55, 120, 122–23, 126
 Reiss, I.L., 7, 55
 Reissman, C., 48, 126
 Reitzes, D.C., 31–2
 Relavas, A.P., 309–10
 Remondet, J.H., 236
 Renick, M.J., 101, 373–75
 Renk, K., 159–61
 Rentfrow, P.J., 104–105, 323
 Reppetti, R.L., 245, 336, 339
 Reske, J.R., 103
 Resnick, H.S., 309–10, 332, 335, 367–68
 Rethinam, V., 259
 Rettig, K.D., 270
 Reyes, J., 383
 Reyes, L., 366
 Rhoades, G.K., 112, 114, 250, 252, 264, 375
 Rhodes, B., 230, 232, 309–10
 Rhodes, J.E., 332
 Ribarich, M., 188
 Rice, D.D., 356
 Rice, F.P., 5–6, 8
 Rich, A.R., 301
 Richards, H.C., 310
 Richardson, J.B., 186
 Richmond, L.S., 91

- Richmond, M.K., 176
 Richtner, D., 375
 Ridley, C.A., 376–77
 Riedmann, A., 178
 Rienks, S.L., 176
 Riggio, H.R., 172, 181
 Riggio, R.E., 94
 Riggs, M.L., 163, 256, 302
 Riley, L.A., 373
 Rimmer, M., 57, 60
 Rimm-Kaufman, S., 151
 Rinaldis, M., 327
 Rindfuss, R.R., 242–43
 Ringland, J.T., 149
 Risch, G.S., 373
 Ritchey, D., 314
 Ritchie, D.L., 50–1
 Rittenour, C.E., 177–79, 199, 200
 Rivenburg, R., 45
 Rivera, F.I., 20
 Roach, M.A., 149
 Roberto, A.J., 352
 Roberts, J., 57
 Roberts, L.J., 127, 240, 315
 Roberts, L.R., 9
 Roberts, M., 157–58
 Roberts, N., 40
 Roberts, T.W., 270
 Robertson, A., 313
 Robertson, A.K., 311–12
 Robertson, J.A., 244
 Robertson, J.F., 198
 Robins, E., 95–7
 Robinson, E.A., 383
 Robinson, J.D., 272
 Rocca, K.A., 172, 178–80
 Rodgers, K.B., 339
 Rodgers, R.H., 5, 281
 Rodick, J.D., 20
 Rodriguez, J., 87
 Rodriguez, V.B., 296
 Rodin, J., 310
 Rodler, C., 78
 Rodnick, E.H., 20, 304, 306
 Roe, K.M., 190, 192
 Rogers, L.E., 98, 130, 360
 Rogers, S.J., 248, 251
 Rogge, R.D., 80, 237, 251
 Rohrbaugh, J.J., 327
 Roloff, M.E., 63–4, 361
 Rook, K.S., 300
 Root, M.P., 311
 Rorty, M., 157, 309–10
 Rosales, G.A., 304, 306
 Roschelle, A.R., 185, 187
 Rose, D.T., 297
 Rose, J., 309
 Rose, P., 352
 Rose, R., 23
 Rose, S.D., 380, 383
 Rosen, C., 105–106
 Rosen, K.H., 352, 364
 Rosen, L.D., 105–106
 Rosenband, R., 91, 109–10
 Rosenbaum, M.E., 98, 296
 Rosenberg, R., 326
 Rosenberg, T.K., 352
 Rosenblatt, A., 97
 Rosenfarb, I.S., 305–306
 Rosenfeld, L.B., 11
 Rosenthal, A., 10
 Rosenthal, S.L., 339
 Rosman, B.L., 308, 330
 Ross, C.E., 321
 Ross, D., 34
 Ross, H., 175
 Ross, H.S., 80
 Ross, S.A., 34
 Ross, L.T., 308
 Rossi, M., 103
 Rossotto, E., 157, 309–10
 Rothman, A.D., 230–31
 Rothman, M.T., 230–31
 Rott, L.M., 198–99
 Rotter, J.C., 54, 151
 Rouch, J., 162
 Rounsaville, B.J., 299
 Rovine, M.J., 122
 Rowa, K., 308
 Roy, A.K., 238
 Roy, R., 325
 Rubin, A., 123
 Rubin, R.B., 98–9
 Ruble, D.N., 156, 230–31
 Ruckstuhl, L., 118, 256, 308
 Rudd, J.E., 360–61
 Rueter, M.A., 174
 Ruffman, R., 173
 Ruiz, S., 79
 Rumstein-McKean, O., 356
 Runyon, M.K., 354–55
 Rusbult, C.E., 83
 Ruscher, S.M., 299
 Rushe, R., 68, 72, 359–60, 362–63
 Russell, C.S., 15, 17–19, 206
 Russell, D., 300
 Russell, M., 245
 Russell, M.N., 373, 377
 Russell, S.T., 145
 Rutenberg, S.K., 233–34
 Rutherford, J., 308
 Ryan, C.E., 341
 Ryan, G., 356
 Ryder, R.G., 379
- S**
 Sabatelli, R.M., 70
 Sabourin, T.C., 359–61
 Sachs-Ericsson, N., 297
 Sadalla, E.K., 110–11
 Safilios-Rothschild, C., 68
 Sahlstein, E.M., 104
 Salazar, A.J., 75
 Salinas, C., 94

- Salstom, S., 356
 Saluter, A., 259
 Salvador, M.,
 Salzinger, S., 349
 Sameroff, A., 57–8, 60–1
 Samter, W., 150–51
 Sanchez-Hucles, J., 146–47
 Sandberg, J.F., 46–8, 54
 Sandeen, E.E., 299
 Sanders, L.M., 193
 Sanders, M.R., 263, 270, 365
 Sandler, H.M., 327
 Sanford, K., 131
 Santiago, J.V., 328
 Santo-Domingo, J., 296
 Santrock, J.W., 167
 Sappenfield, M., 6
 Sareen, J., 262, 357
 Sarkisian, N., 185
 Saunders, B., 332, 335
 Savundranayagam, M.Y., 341
 Scanzoni, J., 248
 Scaramella, L.V., 339
 Schaap, C., 375
 Schackelford, T.K., 111
 Schaefer, E.S., 142, 175
 Schak, K.M., 311
 Scheive, D.H., 51
 Scherlis, W., 301
 Schiff, J.L., 39
 Schilit, R., 366
 Schiller, M., 61
 Schilling, D.A., 375
 Schmaling, K.B., 320
 Schmeeckle, M., 102, 183, 186
 Schmidt, A.M., 192
 Schmidt, E., 351
 Schmidt, U., 312
 Schmitt, D.P., 91, 110–11
 Schneider, R., 164, 356
 Schnurr, P.P., 332, 335
 Schoelmerich, A., 149
 Schofield, T.J., 146
 Schork, M.A., 321
 Schott, T.L., 231
 Schrader, D.C., 51
 Schrodt, P., 17, 51, 65, 84–5, 148, 164, 262,
 274, 280, 288, 297
 Schuldberg, D., 277
 Schulz, M.S., 86, 245
 Schumm, W.R., 152, 350, 372–73
 Schwagler, J., 54, 57, 60
 Schwartz, C.E., 332
 Schwartz, P., 139
 Schwartz, R.C., 384
 Schwede, L., 10, 22, 169
 Schweitzer, R., 314
 Scott, C.K., 132
 Scott, R.L., 238
 Scott, U.M., 106
 Searles, J.S., 316
 Sears, H.A., 337–38
 Sedlack, A.J., 348
 Seefeldt, T., 213, 162
 Seeley, J.R., 300
 Seeman, T.E., 336, 339
 Sege, R.D., 346
 Segrin, C., 39–40, 49, 58, 61, 97, 101, 116, 124,
 126–28, 132–34, 137, 157–58, 211, 218, 239,
 244, 264, 270, 295, 297–99, 301, 309, 317,
 327, 337, 349, 352, 371
 Seiffge-Krenke, I., 92
 Seiger, A., 327
 Seiger, C.P., 246
 Seilhamer, R.A., 315
 Seligman, M.E.P., 132, 143, 154, 156
 Seltzer, J.A., 112
 Selwood, A., 368
 Senchak, M., 317
 Sereika, S.M., 224
 Serewicz, M.C., 199–200
 Serovich, J.M., 224, 366
 Settles, B.H., 4, 9, 76–7
 Sevier, M., 128
 Sexton, M.C., 354–57
 Seyuin, M., 266
 Shackelford, T.K., 93–4, 96, 110–11
 Shaffer, P.A., 125
 Shamai, M., 244
 Shanahan, L., 173
 Shaner, J.L., 195
 Shannon, E.A., 361
 Shanyang, Z., 295, 300
 Shapiro, A., 261, 230–31
 Share, L., 343
 Shaver, P.R., 38–9, 122
 Shaw, D.A., 57
 Shaw, S.M., 46
 Shayka, J.J., 317
 Shearman, S.M., 52, 199
 Shedler, J., 333
 Sheeber, L., 296
 Sheehan, R., 387
 Shehan, C.L., 70
 Shek, D.T.L., 332
 Shenk, J.L., 239
 Sher, K.J., 316–17
 Sher, T.G., 299, 320
 Sheridan, M.J., 332, 335
 Sherman, L., 300
 Sherrand, A.D., 379
 Sherwood, N.E., 309
 Shi, X., 349
 Shields, C.G., 326, 341
 Shields, G., 20
 Shih, J.H., 298
 Shipman, K., 164
 Shoham, V., 327
 Shokemaker, M.M., 341
 Shorter, E., 116
 Shortt, J.W., 362–63
 Shue, C.K., 361
 Shulman, A.D., 92, 270
 Sidelinger, R., 130, 200–201, 334

- Siegert, J.R., 101, 109
Sights, J.R., 310
Signorelli, N., 272
Siler, C., 163
Sillars, A.L., 73, 79, 82–3, 127, 129
Silliman, B., 372–73
Silver, D.H., 40
Silver, N., 121, 129
Silverman, M.S., 379
Silverstein, M., 193, 198
Sim, L.A., 311
Simard, M., 270
Simmens, S., 327, 330–31
Simmons, J., 308
Simmons-Morton, B.G., 334
Simons, L., 150
Simons, R.L., 335, 339, 352
Simpson, J.A., 83
Singer, L.T., 332
Singer, M., 303
Siqueland, L., 387
Skaff, M.M., 205
Skill, T., 272
Skinner, K.B., 269
Slade, P., 308–309
Sladeczek, I.E., 376–77
Slep, A.M.S., 129, 240, 351, 366
Sloane, D., 132, 241
Smailes, E.M., 297
Small, J.A., 340–41
Smit, J.H., 301
Smith, A.M.S., 129
Smith, C. 39, 340–41
Smith, D.A., 222–23
Smith, G.T., 308
Smith, J.M., 296–97
Smith, K.M., 48
Smith, M.J., 34, 36
Smith, S.E., 101–102, 229, 242, 251, 256–57
Smith, S.M., 352, 364
Smith, S.R., 25
Smith, T., 171
Smith, T.W., 323
Smock, P.J., 112, 311
Smokowski, P.R., 23
Smolak, L., 311
Snowden, L.R., 231
Snyder, D.K., 122
Snyder, K.A., 160–61
Snyder, K.S., 306
Snyder, M., 46
Snydersmith, M., 323
Soares, I., 309–10
Socha, T.J., 15, 21–3, 75, 146–47
Sojourner-Nelson, A., 327
Solano, C.H., 301
Soli, A.R., 171
Soliz, J., 188, 193–96, 200, 247, 287
Solomon, J.C., 100, 191
Soltys, S.M., 224
Som, A., 349–50
Sonnega, J.S., 327
Sorell, G., 287
Sorensen, S., 301
Sotirin, P.J., 187–88
Soukup, C., 278–79
Spalding, K., 337
Spanier, G.B., 6, 117
Speice, J., 341
Speicher, C.E., 317
Spieker, S.J., 317
Spiker, D.G., 97
Spitze, G., 177–78, 232
Sprang, G., 349–50
Sprecher, S., 95, 102, 110, 183, 186–88
Sprenkle, D.H., 15, 17–19, 206, 241, 387
Sprey, J., 67–8, 70
Stacey, J., 158–59, 161–63
Stack, D.M., 140
Stack, S., 301
Stafford, L., 103–104, 119–20, 125–26, 129, 138–39, 142–43, 150, 153–54, 158, 164, 166, 173–74
Stahmann, R.F., 372
Stamp, G.H., 101, 109, 359–60
St. Andre, M., 61
Stangor, C., 231
Stanley, S.M., 101, 112, 114, 127, 230, 232, 250–52, 264, 372–75
Stark, K.D., 297
Starratt, V.G., 111
Starrels, M.E., 228
Staten, L.K., 23
Staudinger, U.M., 184
Steadman, P.L., 341
Steiger, H., 309–10
Steil, J.M., 70, 72
Stein, C.H., 188
Stein, M.B., 262, 357
Steinberg, D., 48, 146
Steinberg, L., 151, 157–58
Steinglass, P., 46, 313
Steinmetz, S.K., 5, 13, 80, 347
Stephen, E.H., 242–43
Stephens, J.J., 299
Stephenson, J., 337
Stephure, R.J., 105
Stern, T., 330–31
Sterrett, E., 161
Stets, J.E., 101, 347
Steuber, K., 65–6
Steve, K., 367–68
Stevens, N., 301–302
Stevens-Simon, C., 339
Stewart, S.D., 112, 270
Stewart-Brown, S., 383
Stezenbach, K.A., 179–80
Stice, E., 316
Stimpson, J.P., 300
Stinson, K.M., 72
Stith, S.M., 349–50
Stocker, C.M., 174, 176
Stoiley, J., 158–59, 161–62

- Stolberg, A.L., 257, 260
 Stone, E., 33
 Stoneman, Z., 23, 167, 171
 Storaasli, R.D., 237
 Story, M., 309, 312
 Stout, J.C., 315
 St. Peters, M., 250, 373–74
 Strachan, A.M., 303
 Strachman, A., 125
 Strange, C., 317
 Strange, V., 337
 Stratton, P., 355
 Straus, M.A., 82, 347, 353
 Streigel-Moore, R.H., 308–311
 Stowell, J.R., 325
 Stright, A.D., 157
 Strober, M., 310
 Strohschein, L., 168–70
 Stroufe, A.L., 149
 Strow, B.K., 167
 Stuart, G.L., 361
 Suhomlinova, O., 234
 Suhr, J.A., 125
 Sullivan, H.S., 295
 Sullivan, K.T., 373
 Sullivan, L.M., 321
 Sullivan, M.J.L., 222
 Sullivan, Q., 95, 110
 Sumida, E., 147, 162, 213
 Sunnafrank, M., 98
 Surra, C.A., 91, 102–103, 108–109, 111, 228
 Susman, E.J., 349
 Suter, E.A., 163
 Sutton, P.D., 189
 Suveg, C., 385
 Swain, C.R., 338
 Swann, W.B., 321
 Swanson, B., 68, 127–28
 Sweet, J.A., 12–13, 112, 250, 271
 Swensen, C.H., 48
 Swinford, S.P., 36
 Symmes, D., 150
 Syrè, C.R., 9
 Szinovacz, M.E., 235
- T**
- Tach, L., 112–13
 Tafoya, M., 79, 82–3, 129
 Tajima, E.A., 353, 365
 Talbot, J., 164
 Tam, T., 195
 Tamir, L.M., 299
 Tan, E.T., 159
 Tannenbaum, M., 23
 Tarter, R.E., 333
 Tasker, F., 162
 Taverna, A., 328
 Taylor, A.R., 171
 Taylor, C.B., 324
 Taylor, D.A., 123
 Taylor, M.E., 157–58, 264
 Taylor, M.G., 299
 Taylor, R.J., 192
 Taylor, S.E., 336, 339
 Teachman, J., 93, 248, 269
 Teasdale, J., 132
 Tee, K., 187
 Teitelbaum, M.A., 55
 Telesca, T.Y., 259
 Teti, D.M., 166, 168–69, 171, 175–76, 298
 Teufel-Shone, N.I., 23
 Teven, J.J., 175
 Theiss, J.A., 100–101
 Thibaut, J., 70
 Thirkield, A., 261
 Thoits, P., 232
 Thomas, V., 20
 Thompson, D., 308
 Thompson, H., 374
 Thompson, J.M., 300
 Thompson, R., 80, 299
 Thompson, S.C., 325–26
 Thompson, T., 58
 Thomsen, D.G., 323
 Thomson, E., 276
 Thornton, A., 116, 226, 228, 249
 Thorsen, A.R., 199
 Thorsen, K.L., 159
 Thuen, F., 375
 Thurmaier, F., 251, 395, 374–75
 Tichenor, V.J., 68, 70–1
 Tillmann-Healy, L.M., 58, 166–67
 Timmerman, L., 62
 Ting-Toomey, S., 117, 129
 Tinker, A., 367–68
 Tocilj, G., 309
 Todd, M., 338
 Todd, T.C., 330
 Tolan, P., 364–65
 Toller, P.W., 275
 Tolley-Schell, S.A., 353
 Tolnay, S.E., 96, 103
 Toma, C.L., 105
 Tomcho, T.J., 53–4
 Tomcik, N.D., 135
 Tomiuk, M.A., 78
 Tonelli, L., 374
 Toohey, M., 303
 Torres, N., 20
 Torrez, D.J., 185
 Tortu, S., 335
 Townsley, R.M., 354
 Traweger, C., 312
 Treas, J., 177
 Treasure, J., 312
 Trees, A., 58, 154
 Treiber, F.A., 349
 Tremblay, G.C., 357
 Tremblay, R.E., 289
 Tremont, G., 341
 Trent, K., 177–78
 Trice, A.D., 145
 Trickett, P.K., 349
 Trinke, S., 261

Troll, L.E., 54
 Troome, N., 348
 Trost, M.R., 100–11
 True, J.E., 303
 Truss, A.E., 297
 Tsushima, R., 72
 Tucker, C.J., 85, 173, 176, 178
 Tucker, C.M., 297
 Tucker, J.S., 94, 321–22
 Tucker, P., 229, 168
 Turk, D.C., 326
 Turman, P., 278–79
 Turner, L.H., 31–2, 162, 197
 Turner, M.J., 200
 Turner, R., 75
 Tye-Williams, S., 274
 Tyson, R., 72
 Tzuk, K., 245

U

Uhlenberg, P., 189
 Ukestad, L., 309
 Umberson, D., 340
 Underwood, L.G., 223, 340
 Updegraff, K.A., 85, 173, 176
 Urban Institute, 22
 Urbaniak, L., 379
 Uruk, A.C., 301
 U.S. Census Bureau, 4, 10–13, 187, 190, 247
 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,
 13, 347–48
 Utz, R.L., 236

V

Vade Voort, J.L., 311
 Valkenburg, P.M., 78
 Vaillant, C.O., 237
 Vaillant, G.E., 237
 Valiente, C.E., 373
 Valkenburg, P.M., 104
 Van Camp, C.M., 383
 Vandell, D.L., 167
 Vandereycken, W., 307, 311
 Van Der Graaf, W., 326
 Van Der Hart, O., 57
 Vanderlinden, J., 307, 311
 Van Der Lippe, T., 178–79
 Van Der Merwe, S., 258
 Van Der Poel, A., 326
 Van Der Staak, C., 375
 Van De Weil, H., 326
 Van Dyke, D.T., 373
 Van Egeren, L.A., 149–50
 Van Engeland, H., 308
 Van Furth, E.F., 308
 Vangelisti, A.L., 57–9, 61–4, 94, 96, 98–9, 123,
 229–31, 237–40, 246, 265, 346, 370
 Van Groenow, M.B., 301
 Van Hook, J.V.W., 187
 Van Laningham, J., 237–38
 Van Oost, P., 79, 299
 Van Son, M.J.M., 308

Van Strien, D.C., 308
 Van Volkom, M., 180–81
 Van Widenfelt, B., 375
 Van Wyk, J.D., 383
 Vanzetti, N.A., 132, 241
 Vasquez, K., 40
 Vaughn, C., 305–306
 Velleman, R., 317
 Velligan, D.I., 303–304
 Vemer, E., 269
 Ventura, S.J., 189
 Verbrugge, L.M., 320–22
 Verduyn, C., 309
 Verhoff, J., 116, 251
 Vickerman, K., 359
 Viere, G.M., 53, 56
 Viktor, G., 72
 Villa, L.C., 259
 Vincent, J.P., 241
 Vioovic, V., 309
 Visher, E.B., 285
 Visher, J.S., 285
 Visser, A., 326
 Vitaro, F., 289
 Vodanovich, S.J., 245
 Voel, A., 195
 Vollmer, T.R., 383
 Von Bertalanffy, L., 26
 Voorpostel, M., 178, 197
 Voydanoff, P., 289
 Vranic, A., 353
 Vuchinich, S., 80–1

W

Wachsmuth-Schlaefler, T., 365
 Wackman, D.B., 379–80
 Wade, T.D., 309–10
 Wadsworth, M.E., 374
 Waite, L.J., 367–68
 Waizenhofer, R., 164
 Waldinger, R.J., 86
 Waldner-Haugrud, L.K., 366–67
 Waldren, T., 287
 Waldrop, D.P., 191
 Walen, H.R., 224, 340
 Walitzer, K.S., 164, 316
 Walker, B.J., 379
 Walker, K.L., 140
 Walker, S., 38, 338
 Walker, Z., 368
 Wall, S., 38
 Wallace, J., 262
 Wallace, L.A., 126
 Waller, G., 307–10
 Wallin, P., 92
 Walls, J.K., 145
 Wallston, B., 321
 Walsh, B.T., 309, 311
 Walsh, C.A., 368
 Walsh, F., 235
 Walsh, N., 309
 Walster, E., 96

- Walton, L., 332
 Waltz, J., 359–60, 362–63
 Wamboldt, F., 263, 331
 Wamboldt, M.Z., 7, 57–8, 60–1
 Wampler, K., 287, 380–81
 Wang, G., 335
 Wang, H., 257
 Ward, C., 230
 Ward, L.M., 337
 Ward, R., 232
 Warner, V., 298
 Warren, C., 338
 Watchraversringkan, K., 105
 Waters, E., 38
 Watt, T.T., 316
 Watzlawick, P., 13–14, 207
 Waykayuta, S., 23
 Weakland, J.H., 207
 Weaver, A.D., 337–38
 Weaver, C., 310
 Weaver, S., 276
 Weber, J.A., 191
 Weber, K.D., 93
 Webster, J.J., 309
 Weger, H., 240
 Weigel, D.J., 109, 119, 213
 Weigel, R.R., 213
 Weihls, K.L., 327
 Weinberger, M.I., 249
 Weiner, M., 349
 Weiner, N., 26
 Weiner, S., 313
 Weinstein, K.K., 188
 Weisel, A., 245
 Weiss, R.L., 243
 Weisskrich, R.S., 158
 Weissman, A.G., 304
 Weissman, M., 97, 296, 298–99
 Welch, S.A., 98–9
 Welsh, D.P., 84–5
 Wenzel, A., 96
 Wesner, K.A., 125
 West, A.R., 91
 West, C.M., 366
 West, K.L., 304, 306
 West, M.O., 317
 West, R., 31–2, 162
 Westerhof, G.J., 301–302
 Western, B., 244
 Westman, M., 245
 Whiffen, V.E., 296, 299–300
 Whipple, E.E., 144, 153, 156, 348
 Whitaker, D.J., 356
 Whitbeck, L.B., 335, 339
 Whitbourne, S.K., 249
 Whitchurch, G.C., 8, 13, 15, 26, 29, 30, 33
 White, J.M., 29, 31
 White, J., 25, 72
 White, L., 167, 177–78, 181, 233–34, 288
 White, P., 33
 Whitehouse, C.M., 383
 Whiteman, M., 175, 237, 335
 Whitton, S.W., 21, 86, 117, 126, 250–52, 264, 374
 Whitworth, J.M., 347
 Wickrama, K.A.S., 322, 325
 Wickramarante, P.J., 296, 298
 Widaman, K.F., 94, 155
 Wiese, B.S., 246
 Wilcox, B.L., 9
 Wilfley, D.E., 309, 311
 Wilhelm, B., 190–91, 195–96
 Wilks, J., 314
 Willerton, E., 243
 Williams, A., 189, 195, 236
 Williams, L.B., 328
 Williams, L.M., 373
 Williams, N., 185
 Willis, F.N., 223
 Wills, T.A., 221, 223–24
 Willyard, J., 341
 Wilmot, W.W., 61, 79
 Wilson, B.F., 269
 Wilson, S.R., 144, 153, 156, 298, 348–49
 Winch, R.F., 106
 Windle, J., 266
 Windle, M., 316, 333
 Windridge, K.C., 343
 Wing, J.K., 305
 Winstanley, M., 147, 162, 213
 Winstead, B.A., 63
 Witkin, S.L., 380
 Wittchen, H.U., 295, 300
 Witteman, H., 378–79
 Wolf, B., 10
 Wolfe, D.A., 364
 Wolin, S., 46, 52–3, 55–6
 Wolin, S.J., 55
 Wonderlich, S., 307, 309, 357
 Wong, E.H., 301
 Wong, M., 327, 348
 Woo, S.M., 307
 Wood, B.L., 330–31
 Wood, D., 92
 Wood, J.T., 245
 Wood, P.K., 316
 Woodall, K.L., 329
 Woodin, E., 124
 Woodside, D.B., 311
 World Health Organization, 367
 Worobey, J., 309
 Wortman, C.B., 236
 Woszidlo, A., 157–58
 Wright, D.M., 314
 Wright, D.W., 237
 Wu, K.D., 110
 Wyckoff, S.C., 338
 Wynne, L.C., 302–303
 Wysocki, T., 328

Y

- Yager, J., 157, 309–10
 Yahav, R., 20

Yerby, J., 27, 59
Yerington, T.P., 363
Yoshimoto, D., 68
Young, B., 10, 343
Young, C.R., 200
Young, R.M., 315
Young-DeMarco, L., 116
Youngstrom, E., 328
Yu, J.J., 172
Yu, T., 85
Yurchisin, J., 105

Z

Zabriskie, R.B., 48
Zahn-Waxler, C., 349

Zalot, A.A., 22, 161
Zarate, R., 306
Zarit, S., 197–98
Zautra, A.A.J., 354–56
Zeller, P.J., 299
Zembrod, I.M., 83
Zhang, F., 40
Ziegler-Driscoll, G., 333
Zigler, E., 353
Zill, N., 289
Zinzow, H.M., 356
Zucker, R.A., 315
Zuro, C., 308
Zusman, M.E., 270
Zwetsch, T., 330

Subject Index

A

ABC-X model of family stress 208–10, 368
abuse: adaptability 349, 354–55; childhood sexual abuse 353–58; cohesion 349, 354; conflict 350, 356; definitions 347; elder abuse 367–69; intergenerational transmission 353; isolation 355; parenting practices 349, 355; physical child 348–53; psychological consequences 356; revictimization 357; role confusion and role reversal 355; social cognition theories 351; spousal 358–65; stress and coping 350–51; *see also* depression, eating disorders, family systems theory, sexual behavior, social learning theory, substance abuse
active listening 126–28
adaptability 15, 287–88; *see also* attachment theory, eating disorders, Olson’s circumplex model, substance abuse
affectionless control 296, 298, 310
alcoholism: antisocial vs. nonantisocial 315; children of alcoholics 316–17; description 313; episodic vs. steady drinking 314–15; family interactions 313–14; family rituals 55; in home vs. out of home drinking 315; marital interaction 314–16; *see also* inconsistent nurturing as control theory
allostasis 329
analog codes 14
assortive matching 95–8; *see also* mate selection
attachment theory 37–40, 351
attitude similarity *see* mate selection
attractiveness *see* mate selection
attributions 131–32
aunts 188
autonomy 41

B

behavioral contracting 384
behavioral control 152
behavioral parent training 382–83,
behavioral therapy *see* cognitive-behavioral therapy
binuclear family 5
biobehavioral family model 330,
boundaries 27, 188, 210, 278, 283–84, 286–87,
385–86

C

caregiving 197–98, 340–42
child abuse *see* abuse
childhood illness *see* physical health
childhood sexual abuse *see* abuse
children of alcoholics *see* alcoholism
circumplex model of family functioning
see Olson’s circumplex model
climate *see* family communication climate
coercive power 69
cognitive-behavioral therapy 384
cognitive editing 132
cognitive restructuring 385
cohabitation 112–14, 250
cohesion 17–18, 287–88, 297; *see also*
abuse, eating disorders, Olson’s
circumplex model, sexual behavior, substance
abuse
commitment 108–109, 117
communal coping 222–23; *see also* coping
communication accommodation theory 194
communication privacy management theory 62,
342–43
commuter marriage 48, 243
compensatory hypothesis 163
complementary sibling relationships 167–68
conflict: adult children and parents 198–99;
childhood illness 329; definition 79; depression
296; divorce 251; family communication
environment 86; family of origin 86–7;
frequency 80–82; marriage 128–30; negative
affect and 128–29; patterns 85–7; physiological
responses to 322–24; stepfamilies and 285–87;
strategies and tactics 82–4; topics of 79–80;
see also abuse, perpetual conflicts, sibling
relationships, solvable conflicts, substance
abuse, violence
conformity orientation 50
control *see* parental control
conversation orientation 50
coparenting 164
coping 219–23
core triad of balance theory 117–18
couple types *see* marital couple types
Couples Communication Program 379–81

490 *Subject Index*

courtship patterns 108–109
critical transition hypothesis 226
culture: divorce 249; extended family 185–86;
individualism-collectivism 22, 72;
masculinity-femininity 23, 71; mental
health 305–306; parenting 145–47;
power-distance 71; *see also* grandparents

D

dating violence, 352
decision making 74–9
definitions of family: lay perspectives 9–10;
structural 4; task orientation 6–7; transactional
7–8; U.S. Census Bureau 4–5
demand-withdrawal 128, 239–40, 359
demography 247
depression: abuse 297; assortive matching;
description 295; family of origin experiences
296–98; family transformations 300;
marital interaction 299–300; parent-child
interactions 298–99; *see also* conflict, marital
distress
dialectical perspective 41–3, 274–76
digital codes 13
disillusionment model 102
divorce: behavioral cascade 252–54; child
custody 265–66; distance and isolation cascade
254–55; effects on adult offspring 260–62;
effects on children 258–60; empty nest
marriages 234; individual risk factors 249–50;
intergenerational transmission 262–64; marital
interaction 250–55; postdivorce relations
257–58; societal factors 248–49; stations
of 265–66; trends 13, 247–48; *see also*
disillusionment model, emergent distress,
enduring dynamics model, grandparents,
physical health, remarriage, sibling
relationships
double ABC-X model of family stress 210–13
dyadic power theory 71

E

eating disorders: adaptability 308; child abuse
311–12; cohesion 308; description 307; family
dynamics 308–10; overprotectiveness 310;
parent-child interactions 310–11
emergent distress 257
emergent properties 27
emotion: emotion coaching 147–48; expressed
emotion 305–306, 308; flooding 153; negative
affect reciprocity 239, 359; regulation 147,
184; *see also* violence
empty nest marriages 234
enduring dynamics model 242, 256
equifinality 29 *see also* family systems theory
evolutionary psychology 110–111; *see also* mate
selection
exit-voice-loyalty-neglect model 83
expert power 69
expressed emotion *see* schizophrenia, eating
disorders, substance abuse
extended family 183

F

family adjustment and adaptation response
model 214–15
family communication climate 50–55
family communication environment 50–52
family communication standards 52
family diversity 21–23
family interaction quantity vs. quality 48–49
family lifecycle 226–27
family of orientation 5
family of origin 5
family size 10–11
family systems theory 26–30, 313, 350
father roles 158
feedback and calibration 28–29
fictive kin 186
firm control 144
forgiveness 135, 199
four horsemen of the apocalypse *see* divorce,
behavioral cascade

G

gay and lesbian couples: differences from
heterosexual couples 138–39; parenting
162–63; relationship processes 138;
relationship quality 138
gender differences 122, 324
gender roles 187–88; *see also* parenthood
grandparents: caregiving 190–92; communication
with grandchildren 194–96; cultural variation
192–93; divorce 193–94, 262; solidarity with
grandchildren 196–97; styles 190–91; timing
189–90; types 190–91
guilt induction 156, 306

H

health *see* physical health
holism 26; *see also* family systems theory
homeostasis 29
homosexual couples *see* gay and lesbian couples

I

in-laws 199–201
incarceration 243–44; *see also* stress
incomplete institutionalization hypothesis 273
inconsistent nurturing as control theory 316
intergenerational stake hypothesis 196
intergenerational transmission of divorce
see divorce
intergroup contact theory 195
interracial marriage 96
intersubjectivity 14
intimacy: behavioral interdependence 109;
definition, 120; interpersonal process model
122–23; partner responsiveness 122

L

legitimate power 69
loneliness: marriage 301–302, social support 301
long-distance relationships 103–104
long-term marriages 139–40
love withdrawal 153

M

Marital Assessment and Preparation (MAP) 377
 marital couple types 135–37
 marital distress: changes over time 237–38;
 depression 299; negativity in interactions
 238–39; perceptual inaccuracy 131–33;
 premarital communication 242; *see also*
 demand-withdrawal, emotion, nonverbal
 behavior, vulnerability-stress-adaptation model
 marital satisfaction 117, 132–33; *see also*
 parenthood
 marital success 116–19
 marital violence *see* violence
 Marriage Encounter 377–79
 marriage trends 11–12
 mate selection: age 92; attitude similarity 98;
 chastity 93–4; ecological models 109–10;
 effects of past relationships 93; physical
 attractiveness 94; preferences 93–5;
 proximity 103; relationship beliefs 92; stage
 models 98–102, 106–108; *see also* assortive
 matching, repulsion hypothesis
 matrifocal tilt 188
 McMaster model of family functioning 20–1
 Mead, George Herbert 31
 media portrayals 170, 271–72
 metacommunication 14–15
 military duty 243; *see also* stress
 morphogenesis 28, 206
 morphostasis 28
 mother roles 160–61
 multigenerational living 187
 Murstein's stimulus-value-role model 107
 mutual influence 28

N

narratives 60–1
 networks: family interaction 49–50; social 102,
 113, 177, 184–85, 228, 258, 266
 nonverbal behavior: intimacy and 124; long-term
 marriages 140; marital distress 241–42; parental
 warmth 149–51, 154
 norms 46–7
 nuclear family 5

O

Olson's circumplex model 15–20
 Olson's systems model of family stress *see* stress
 online dating 104
 oral history interview 134, 256

P

parent-child interaction: children leaving home
 and 232; divorce 261–62; stepfamilies 274–76,
 282–83; *see also* depression, eating disorders
 parent training programs 381–83
 parental control 143–45, 151–54, 155–58
 parental intrusiveness 157–58
 parental warmth 143, 154–55; *see also* nonverbal
 behavior
 parenthood: changes in marital interaction
 230–31; changes in marital satisfaction 229–30;

planning and timing 231; traditionalization of
 gender roles 230–31; transition to 229
 parentification 261
 parenting styles, 143–48
 perception 131–35
 perpetual conflicts 81, 129–30
 physical health: aging and 235–36; caregiving
 340–42; childhood illness 328–31; divorce 320;
 marital interaction 320–27; marriage and major
 health problems 325–27; privacy 342–43;
 social support 340; *see also* biobehavioral family
 model, caregiving, conflict, psychosomatic
 family model, social control theory
 physical punishment 152
 physiological responses to marital interaction
 322–25
 power: definition 67–8, sources of 68–72
 power dependency theory 68
 praxis 42; *see also* dialectical perspective
 Premarital Personal and Relationship Evaluation
 (PREPARE) 376,
 prevention: primary 371, 372–73; secondary 371,
 377–79; tertiary 371, 383–84,
 Prevention and Relationship Enhancement
 Program (PREP) 373–76,
 problem solving 20, 128, 138, 222, 238, 298,
 309–10, 315, 328, 351, 384
 proximity *see* mate selection
 proximity seeking 37
 psychological control 152
 psychological separation theory 80
 psychosomatic family model 330
 purchasing and children 78–9

R

reciprocal sibling relationships 167
 referent power 69
 reflected self-appraisal 32
 relational bank account model 118
 Relationship Enhancement program (RE) 376,
 relationship maintenance 119–21, 123
 relationship repair 130
 religion 23, 80, 249
 remarriage 250, 268–70
 repulsion hypothesis 98
 resource dilution hypothesis 168
 retirement 235
 revelation risk model 65–6
 reward power 68–9
 rituals 126; definition 52–3; functions 53–6;
 problems 56–7
 roles 158–63; power and 72–3; *see also* abuse,
 father roles, mother roles, grandparents,
 parenthood, stepfamilies, violence
 rules 15, 27, 51, 62, 73–4, 144, 205, 207–208,
 309, 334, 343

S

sacrifice 134–35
 safe haven 37
 scaffolding 151
 scapegoating 164

492 *Subject Index*

- schizophrenia: affective style 306–307;
communication deviance 302–305; description
302; expressed emotion 305–306
- secure base 37
- secrets 61–6
- self-construals 117
- self-disclosure 122–23, 379
- self-expansion 98
- self-reflexivity 26
- sentiment override 132
- separation protest 37
- Settles' model of decision making 76–7
- sexual behavior 336–39
- sibling relationships: adulthood and 177–81;
caregiving and support 171–72; conflict
173–76, 179–80; definitions 166–67;
deidentification 175; differential treatment
by parents 176–77; old age 181; parental
divorce and 172; parental involvement in 176;
relationship maintenance 178–79; socialization
173–74; transition to siblinghood 168–69;
types of 167–68, 180–81
- single parents 161–62
- sleeper effect 101
- social control theory 321–22
- social exchange theory 70–1
- social learning theory 33–7, 350; *see also*
substance abuse, violence
- social support 223–24; *see also* loneliness, physical
health
- societal influence on family interaction 47
- socioemotional selectivity theory 183–85
- solvable conflicts 81, 129–30
- spillover hypothesis 163–64
- stability: attachment styles 40; dialectic
approach 43; family systems 28; marriage 117
- stages of relationships 98–9
- standards for family communication 52
- stations of divorce *see* divorce
- stepfamilies: alternative terms 271; child
adjustment 289–90; communication
challenges in 283–85; development
trajectories 273–74, 278–79; incomplete
institutionalization hypothesis 273; phases
277; resilience 290; roles 276–77; societal
views 271–73; types 279–83; *see also* conflict,
dialectical perspective, media portrayals,
turning points
- stories 57–60
- stress: aging 235–36; appraisal 221–22;
definitions 205; launching children 232–34;
levels of 207; nonnormative 206, 236–37;
normative 206, 226–27; Olson's systems
model 215–17; pileup 211; separation from
family 242–44; transition to marriage 227–29;
transition to parenthood 230–32; *see also*
ABC-X model of family stress, double
ABC-X model of family stress, coping, family
adjustment and adaptation response model,
vulnerability-stress-adaptation model
- structural family therapy 385–86
- substance abuse: abuse 332–33; adaptability 332;
cohesion 332; expressed emotion 332; parent-
ing 333–34; social learning 334–35; symbolic
interaction theory 30–3
- Systematic Training for Effective Parenting
(STEP) 381–83
- systems theory *see* family systems theory
- ### T
- technology 186–87
- triangulation 84
- Turner's decision making styles 25–6
- turning points 108–109
- ### V
- verbal aggression 361
- vicarious experience 34–5
- violence: argumentation skills 361; forms
and definitions 346–47; gay and lesbian
relationships 366–67; intergenerational
transmission of spouse abuse 364–65; marital
358–66; marital violence and child abuse
365–66; patriarchal social structure 363–64;
relational control 360; roles 360–61; social
learning 364–65; types of abusive spouses
361–63
- vulnerability-stress-adaptation model of marriage
217–19
- ### W
- warmth *see* parental warmth
- widowhood 236
- Winch's complimentary needs model 106
- work-family balance 244–46
- working models 38