
3 Theoretical Approaches to Understanding Communication in the Family

Introduction of Theory

Family Communication Theories

Roles Theory

Family Roles

Nurturing Roles

Providers

Nurturers

Development Expert (social, emotional, and physical)

Health Care Provider

Controlling Roles

Behavior Control

Decision-Making, Family Boundary

Maintenance, and Financial Organization

Dealing With Role Strain: Dual-Worker and

Dual-Career Families and Gender Roles

Family Systems Theory

Families as Self-Regulatory Goal-Attaining Systems

The Normative Model

The Developmental Task Model

The Psychopolitical Model

The Opportunity Matrix Model

Reflexive Spiral Model

Unified Transcybernetic Model

Rules Theory

Verbal Rules of Communication

Nonverbal Rules of Communication

Summary

Key Terms

Questions for Application

Introduction of Theory

At this point, we have a full understanding of the definitions of *family*, *communication*, and *family communication*. We also have more understanding of the complexities of families in the 21st century through our exploration in Chapter 2 of the various family forms and their potential impacts on family communication. To most fully understand the nature of families and the communication dynamics within them, however, we must fully understand the nature of **theory**. Before you turn off completely at the abstractness of this concept in the face of the concreteness of the types of families we have just discussed, let me try to persuade you that theories will be concretely useful to us in our application to families. By focusing on families, theories can be socially meaningful and applied.

Theories give us a mechanism for understanding phenomena, and families are one such phenomenon. Theories provide us with several functions that will be highly useful as we go about the business of understanding families. First, theories can **describe** phenomenon (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005). In other words, theories can answer the “what?” question. To be more specific, understanding *what* single-parent families, binuclear families, and gay families are is all the work of description. Description can also allow us to delineate the similarities and differences of families (and their accompanying definitions). Families are all the same because they all exhibit the characteristics of relatedness, nurturing, and control, as we described these concepts in Chapter 1. In addition, they are all different in that single-parent families have a single head of household, and binuclear families have a biological mother and stepfather in one home and a biological father and stepmother in another home. Gay families have parents who are homosexual and live in a committed relationship with their partner. This offers a nice understanding of the *types* of families that are out there, but it does little to help us understand the complex differences and outcomes associated with each family type. The second function of theories can help us on this front.

Second, theories can help **predict** concrete outcomes (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005), or in other words, they help enumerate *how* something will occur. This is especially important with families because governmental agencies, religious groups, and concerned parents are all interested in the potential effects of communication among family members. Specifically, governmental agencies and religious groups frequently form theories that allow them to predict that traditional nuclear families produce different outcomes than do single-parent homes in terms of better academic performance and less delinquency among the children in those homes (e.g., McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Alternatively, parents with teenagers may be interested in predicting the best form of communicating with their teens about risky sexual behavior and the potential outcomes associated with it. They might want to know, for instance, that parent-child closeness is associated with reduced adolescent pregnancy risk through teens remaining sexually abstinent, postponing

intercourse, having fewer sexual partners, and using contraception more consistently (e.g., Miller, Benson, & Galbraith, 2001). Regardless of *why* these outcomes are occurring, simply knowing that closeness predicts these outcomes is good enough to encourage mothers and fathers to try to be closer to their adolescent children. However, theories can offer us much more than simply description and prediction.

Most important, theories can provide **explanations** for phenomenon (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005). In this way, theories can help us understand the “why?” question. In other words, theories can not only help us differentiate among various family forms and their predicted outcomes but can also help us understand *why* these differences exist. In other words, knowing that nuclear families are traditionally from higher-income and lower-risk situations can help explain why they provide kids with the stability and guidance necessary to perform well in school and perform socially acceptable behaviors. In addition, theories can help us understand why parents who are closer to their kids are probably more likely to talk to them about more “risky” topics such as safe sex and therefore provide much-needed information to help their children choose to perform less risky sexual behaviors (*explanation*). The outcomes associated with those risky behaviors (e.g., pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases) are therefore less likely to accrue (*prediction*). As you can see, theories that provide explanations are stronger than theories that only predict in that they also provide predictions for outcomes. Therefore, understanding the *why* necessarily informs the *how*. Closeness with parents leading to more talk about sexually risky behavior and its consequence is the *why*, and less negative sexual outcomes is the *how* (i.e., more talk leads to less negative sexual outcomes).

Finally, theories can help us **control** the outcomes in question (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005). Knowing that kids who are closer to their parents are less likely to engage in risky sexual behavior, for instance, allows us to make policy recommendations. Theories allow us to draw socially meaningful implications with the strength to explain *why*. To be more specific, if parents are encouraged to be closer to their teens and, further, encouraged to talk more openly with their kids about sex and its potential risks, then it is possible that sexually risky outcomes among adolescents can be diminished. We see, then, that strong theories can *describe, predict, explain, and control* phenomena and the outcomes associated with them. Instead of providing esoteric and abstract conceptualizations with very little real-world meaning, theories can provide us with the very vehicles that make it possible to describe, predict, explain, and control socially meaningful outcomes with regard to families and the communication that occurs within them.

Family Communication Theories

Now that we understand why it is that we actually like theories (for their ability to help us describe, predict, explain, and control family communication),

let's review three theories that you should find particularly useful in understanding your own families of origin. Although many additional theories will be introduced throughout this text, these three theories are highlighted in a separate chapter because of their enduring ability to describe, explain, and predict communication behavior within families across a wide variety of situations and forms. **Roles theory** helps us understand why various members of our family behave and communicate in the ways they do. Roles theory argues that you can predict a role holder's behavior by the roles he or she holds. Mothers are most likely to be the *nurturers*, for instance, whereas fathers are most likely to be the *resource providers*. These roles provide powerful prescriptions for behavior and expectations for how those behaviors should be carried out. **Family systems theory** allows us to understand the ways in which families operate not as individuals but as members of a collective group known as a family. This perspective assumes that the whole of the family is greater than the sum of the parts and that you can never fully understand a family and its communication by attempting to understand its individual constituents. Finally, **rules theory** helps us understand the complex nature of communication rules that occur within families. For instance, families often contain unwritten rules for who talks to whom about what. Specifically, it may be OK to talk to your big sister about the sensual nature of the encounter you had with your girlfriend or boyfriend last night, but there may be strict sanctions if the same conversation were carried out with your mother or father.

Roles Theory

Roles theory assumes that we all hold a variety of roles and that those roles dictate the behavior we will use to carry out those roles on the stage of life. Thus, mothers are simply playing at being moms, and fathers are similarly acting out the role of dads. To flesh this out a bit more, it would behoove us to visit Goffman's (1959) earliest delineation of roles (drama) theory. In it, he argues that there is no such thing as a stable "self" but that we are all really a composite of all the various roles we hold. While self is a topic worthy of its own course, the concepts most relevant to our discussion of families include *roles*, *role expectations*, *performances*, *front-stage behavior*, *back-stage behavior*, and *wings*. **Roles** can be thought of as the various positions we hold in relation to others. We can be mothers, fathers, daughters, boyfriends and girlfriends, wives, husbands, educators, friends, students, and so on. You get the picture. Each role has its own set of expectations associated with it as well as its own set of behaviors that best fulfill its function. **Role expectations** include anticipated behaviors associated with a particular role. Mothers, for instance, are expected to be available and devoted to their children. This would explain the intensely negative reactions that society has to substance-abusing mothers or mothers who abuse,

neglect, or abandon their children. These behaviors are simply not part of the expectation of motherhood and in fact run counter to notions of what “good mothers” *should* do. In addition, “fathers should earn an income” is another example of a powerful role expectation. Stay-at-home dads often become the brunt of jokes regarding slothfulness, laziness, and the like—this at a time when the value of stay-at-home mothers’ jobs is estimated at \$131,471 per year (O’Brien, 2002). Nonetheless, violations of expectations for role behavior can have very powerful evaluations associated with them.

Performances include all behaviors associated with a particular role. Good daughters should obey their mothers, clean their rooms, never swear (in front of their mothers!), be respectful, and so on. Sisters should be loyal. Fathers should be strong, rational, industrious, and hard working. I’m confident that if pressed, you could delineate a whole set of behaviors associated with any familial role. According to Goffman (1959), these performances are carried out on a stage. The **front stage** is where you perform your role. For instance, mothers are expected to perform their role as “mother” in the home environment and whenever they are in the presence of their children. However, you would not expect this same woman to perform her role of mother in the boardroom with her colleagues. Her colleagues would find this highly offensive indeed because this situation would call for front-stage behavior as “professional/colleague/coworker.” This same situation could be considered back stage for the mother role because the woman may feel freer to swear, be less likely to cook, and be less vigilant about the safety of her environment than she would be at home (she might not put safety covers over her office electrical outlets, for instance). In other words, the **back stage** is anywhere where you do not feel the pressure to perform one of your primary roles. You can thus “let down” on the behaviors that were important in the other role. Of course, according to Goffman, you are probably performing some other role there because we are either always performing when we are in the presence of others or carrying around a “generalized other” for whom one performs at all times. In other words, Goffman would argue that a woman who highly identifies with her mothering role will always behave in ways that are consistent with the performance of that role (almost as if her child could always see her).

Finally, if you have ever been on a stage, you will be aware that a stage has wings behind the curtains and off to the sides where actors prepare for their roles. Similarly then, Goffman (1959) argues that **wings** are those areas where mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, and so on prepare for their roles. When I choose my clothing (costume), I’ll choose apparel that is appropriate for my role. This makes some sense because I certainly did not wear silk blouses at home for my daughter to spit up on when she was an infant, and similarly, I don’t wear my “painting” jeans around the office. In addition, we may have several **performance experts** in the wings who help us prepare for our roles. Not unlike other mothers I know, I frequently called good ol’ big sis to get the scoop on the best techniques for getting my daughter to

sleep on a schedule, which medicines work best on high fevers in the middle of the night, and when I could go back to work without upsetting the attachment balance. Like most performance experts, she was also not given any credit as I carried out my role, pretending that I had had the “intuitive mother wisdom” all along.

Family Roles

Family roles are important to the extent that they dictate behavior and affect the communication associated with those roles. Families are a high-task situation in that many jobs must be performed for groups to function as families. Roles within the family help us coordinate task completion. In my own family, for instance, I am in charge of educational development. Anything that comes under the heading “education” falls to me. When Huw (my oldest stepson) began the process of applying to college, I was well aware that I would be the one in charge of guiding him through this task. The boys’ biological mother, however, is an emergency room nurse. She is therefore responsible for the maintenance of physical health, and all doctors’ appointments and the like fall to her. When Huw dropped the motorcycle, badly scraping his knee, it was his mother who came over to our house to clean the wound with a toothbrush (no kidding!). As this illustration shows, roles help us organize who does what in families.

Nurturing Roles

Nurturing roles include many different subroles and accompanying tasks. Nurturing basically includes the provision of care, warmth, and an environment capable of encouraging the growth and development of family members. This can include the **provider**, who supplies the resources required to allow for the types of activities necessary to encourage growth and development. Nurturing roles also include a **nurturer** who provides care in all its various forms (e.g., feeding, bathing, cuddling, communicating). Overlapping with these roles is the **developer**, or the person who is in charge of ensuring growth and development as a human across physical, social, emotional, and intellectual realms. Finally, included in the nurturing roles is the **health care provider**, or the person who generally maintains family members’ health through arranging for doctors’ visits, applying bandages, dispensing medicine, and the like.

Provider(s). The family member in charge of provision of resources supplies the money, food, clothes, and other durable items that maintain the household. Historically, fathers’ economic contributions to development have been more heavily valued than their contributions to child care and

housework (Griswold, 1993). Although the changes in society cited earlier may make it seem less likely now than in the past, this still appears to be the case in the majority of households. In fact, reviews of the extensive literature on economic resources and marriage show consistently that greater economic resources are significantly associated with higher rates of marriage for men (e.g., Xie, Raymo, Goyett, & Thorton, 2003). This is especially the case for measures of earning potential (current earnings, earnings over the next 5 years, future earnings, past earnings, and lifetime earnings). These same measures of earning potential did not predict marriage for women. Furthermore, as women's earnings rise, they become more independent and report a decline in the desire for marriage (Oppenheimer, 1997). Finally, only 23% of women in dual-earner couples earned as much as, or more than, their husbands in 1997 (Brennan, Chait Barnett, & Gareis, 2001). This figure is consistent with a more recent analysis of U.S. Census 2000 data showing that 19% to 30% of wives in dual-career families earn more than their husbands (Winkler, McBride, & Andrews, 2005). However, this trend appears transitory in that only 60% of couples maintain this disparity for more than 3 years. Thus, there still exists a strong societal pressure in our society for the man to be the primary resource provider for the family. So much so that if he is deemed less likely to earn money or the woman makes more money, he is less desirable as a marriage partner.

Regardless of this pressure on the man to be the primary resource provider of the family, we are beginning to see a preponderance of mothers entering the workforce as well. As you may recall from Chapter 2, the number of married-couple families with wives in the labor force has increased from 31% in 1976 to 51% in 2000 (compared with 70% of women without an infant). This figure is even higher for educated women (64%) and black women (66%; Bachu & O'Connell, 2001). Remember also that the percentage of working mothers increases as their children grow, with working mothers with children under 6 increasing to 59% and those with children between 6 and 17 increasing to 74% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003a). Thus, between half and three quarters of mothers work outside the home.

Certain factors enhance the likelihood that mothers will be resource providers. Mothers cite economic need as the most pressing consideration (Israelson, 1989). However, women who score higher on traditional male characteristics are also more likely to work (Krogh, 1985), whereas women who are traditionally more feminine are more likely to take on more feminine caregiving tasks (Burroughs, Turner, & Turner, 1984). Furthermore, a husband with more pro-feminist views is also more likely to have a wife in the workplace (Biaggio, Mohan, & Baldwin, 1985).

Nurturers. The provision of nurturance includes providing care, support, and warmth (including, but not limited to, child care and household tasks). Similar to resource providers, nurturers seem equally split along gender lines.

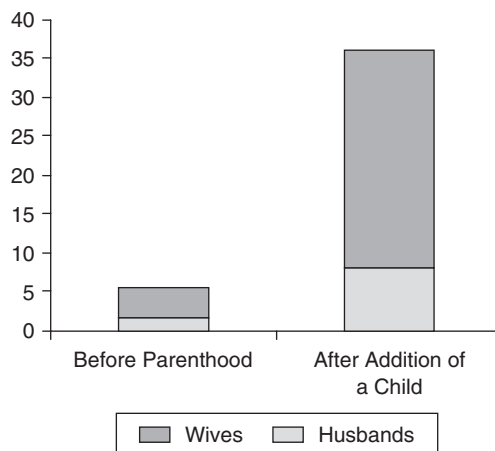


Figure 3.1 Number of Household Chores

SOURCE: Houston and Holmes (2004).

Whereas men are expected to be the primary resource providers, women are expected to be the nurturer-caregivers. This gender division is apparent both before and after children are added to the family. Before parenthood, wives complete 67% of the household chores (3.9 chores a day on average), and husbands complete the remaining 33% of chores (1.9 chores a day on average) (Huston & Vangilisti, 1995; MacDermid, Huston, & McHale, 1990). Following the addition of a child, there is a sixfold increase in the number of family-related activities performed, from 5.8 per day to 36.2 per day (see Figure 3.1). New mothers increase to 5.3 household tasks and 22.7 child care tasks. New fathers, in comparison, increase their household tasks to 2.4 per day while accruing an additional 5.9 child care tasks. Women in dual-earning couples report spending an average of 15 hours a week on household tasks compared with men's 6.8 hours (Stevens, Kiger, & Riley, 2001). As these numbers make obvious, women are completing more traditionally nurturing tasks than are men.

Although this disparity in task load is striking to the observer, women complete up to two thirds of household work before they feel that the division of labor is unfair (Lennon & Rosenfield, 1994). However, women who contribute highly to the family income are more likely to perceive an unequal division of household labor as unfair compared with women who earn less than their husbands (Stevens et al., 2001). Furthermore, the *perception* of relational and psychological shared parenting is more important in predicting marital satisfaction than the actual division of the child care tasks (Ehrenberg, Gearing-Small, Hunter, & Small, 2001). Men, alternatively, feel that the workload is unjustly divided when 36% of the tasks fall on them. Interestingly, men contribute more to the household and perceive greater

fairness when both they and their wives perceive their contributions to be more competent (Grote, Naylor, & Clark, 2002).

Consistent with these findings, women who work outside the home still perceive that their primary role is as nurturer in the home (MacDermid et al., 1990), as do their husbands. Both spouses appear to be comfortable with this understanding (McHale & Huston, 1984). Even among women who work 30 hours or more, only 12% thought that men should be equally responsible for chores (Crouter, Perry-Jenkins, Huston, & McHale, 1987). Consistently, wives who became mothers reduce their involvement in work for pay and increase their involvement in household work (MacDermid et al., 1990). Thus, it appears that in at least two thirds of families, both men and women perceive that women should be (and are) the primary providers of nurturance in the family (Gilbert, 1994). One potential explanation for this gender role division is that women's self-esteem may be linked to the role of primary caregiver, particularly when the child is an infant (Josephs, Markus, & Tafarodi, 1992). Lest it be thought that all dual-working couples *must* split tasks along gender lines, Gilbert (1994) found that nearly one third of dual-career couples were "role sharing," in that both spouses were actively involved in household and parenting duties.

Development Expert (physical, social, emotional, and intellectual). Closely linked to the role of nurturer-caregiver is the role of physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development. Obviously, if women perform more of the child care tasks, they will be preparing the food, dressing the child, and so on to ensure the **physical growth and development** of the child. However, it is also obvious that the ability to provide food, clothing, and shelter depends on the resource provider's ability to furnish these necessities. Furthermore, fathers are frequently involved in the physical development of the child in terms of sports achievements and rough-and-tumble play (Huston & Holmes, 2004). More fathers are coaches, push the bike for the first ride, and are outside throwing the ball with their child. Physical development includes both growth and accomplishment. Further consideration of these contributions of parents is provided in Chapter 6 on socializing children.

Social development includes becoming a socioemotionally competent communicator. Although both parents contribute to this process through their many modeled interactions with their children, many children rely on their mothers for information about how to interact socially. Mothers of 3- to 5-year-olds were found to have a direct effect on their children's social competence through their coaching and their communication style with their children (Mize & Petit, 1997). Linking physical and social development, most adolescents acquire information regarding sex from their mothers, and their mothers are more effective at reducing risky sexual behavior and the outcomes associated with them (Jaccard, Dittus, & Gordon, 2000). Thus, mothers may be highly influential in socializing social competence.

Consistently, mothers may be more instrumental in encouraging **emotional development** as well; mothers have been known to encourage the expression of “strong emotions” (anger, frustration, pride) by their sons compared with the weaker emotions (sadness, fear) (e.g., Mulac, Studley, Wiemann, & Bradac, 1987; Shields, 1987). Finally, mothers are highly instrumental in encouraging **intellectual development**. In fact, parents seem to have almost intuitive abilities to stimulate their children’s learning (Papousek, Papousek, & Haekel, 1987), and most caregiver behaviors provide teaching to their infants (Van Egeren & Barratt, 2004). Mothers are particularly adept at stimulating their infants; most frame their communication to infants as “motherese,” or specialized speech addressed to infants (Yingling, 1995). Given that mothers most often adapt their work schedules to accommodate the needs of the children (Chait Barnett, Gareis, Boone James, & Steele, 2003), it is highly likely that mothers also provide the most focus with regard to academic achievements as they assist with homework and in other ways provide the groundwork for intellectual growth (e.g., reading to the child and otherwise communicating with the child in ways that encourage intellectual maturation; Laakso, Poikkeus, Eklund, & Lyytenin, 2004).

Health Care Provider. Health care provision is the last role that falls under nurturance. Not surprisingly, because women are doing a majority of the child care tasks, they are frequently relied on to nurse their babies through illnesses; arrange for doctors, dentists, and eye exams; and generally attempt to maintain the health of their offspring. It is frequently the case that they nurse their spouses as well. In addition, extended families can be included here in that children are now nursing their elderly parents in the home, and more positive outcomes are expected in mother-daughter than mother-son relationships (Cicirelli, 2003). Furthermore, more mothers are portrayed as fulfilling the caregiving role in magazine depictions, and these magazines (mostly aimed at mothers) include child’s health issues as a major topic (Francis-Connolly, 2003). Only mothers were the focus of a research project examining the beliefs of mothers regarding potential injuries to their preschool children (Weatherman, 2003). It is fair to assume from this research that more women are expected to fulfill health care roles in the family.

Resource provision and nurturing roles across family forms. Based on this review of findings, it appears that both men and women play the resource provision and nurturing (nurturing, development, health care) roles now. Regardless of this verifiable fact, it still appears to be the case that the man is expected to be the *primary resource provider*, based on the fact that earning potential is a consistent predictor of marriage for men, and the woman is expected to be the *primary nurturer*, based on the fact that she will cut back on outside work-related activities and ungrudgingly complete a greater share of the household and child-rearing responsibilities. This proves especially problematic for single mothers raising children (84% of all single-parent

homes), because the mother head of household is often expected to be the resource provider *and* the nurturer. This may account for the fact that up to one third of mother-headed households live below the poverty line (Connecticut Health Policy Project, 2003). Single mothers struggle to fulfill both the resource provision and nurturer roles simultaneously. As we have seen above, most women place greater role salience on their nurturing mother role and spend less time at work or leave work altogether when their children are small. Thus, single mothers experience a great deal of role strain as they attempt to balance out resource provision and nurturing roles. This strain should play itself out in communication in the family such that the mother who must work to support her children has less time to spend communicating in nurturing ways with her children (e.g., less time to help with homework, to have a leisurely cuddle in the morning before school, to chat over dinner) and may experience more role strain and stress, which may also play itself out in the *quality* of the communication when communication does occur.

Such role strain should also be apparent for single fathers, although there appear to be fewer single fathers living below the poverty line, which indicates that they may prefer their resource provision role over their nurturing role (as society dictates and as indicated by the research indicating that women do more of the child care tasks). Little research exists regarding the provision of resources or nurturing in the blended home, but the research reviewed in Chapter 2 indicating that stepmothers are more involved in the parenting role than are stepfathers indicates that the traditional roles of male resource provider and female nurturer continue to prevail in the blended home. Very little research exists regarding the breakdown of resource provider and nurturer roles in cohabiting, married with no children, gay, and gay couples with children families. It can still be expected, however, that one person is *primarily* responsible for each role within each household. For example, in the gay couple who adopted children in Florida (the Rosie O'Donnell example from Chapter 2), one of the partners quit his nursing job to stay home full-time with the children while the other partner went out to work. It should therefore be expected that the roles of resource provision and nurturers are in evidence in families regardless of their form. These roles, in turn, allow us to predict that the nurturer in these families communicates in more nurturing ways, while the resource provider may be the more distant communicator who is allowed more freedom to influence through his or her communication when it occurs.

Controlling Roles

Although providing a nurturing environment is essential for encouraging growth in the family, it is not the only element to ensure development. Control, or limiting behavioral options of other family members, is also

central to ensuring goal attainment within the family. Certain members of the family will be more instrumental in providing guidelines and limitations for family members' behaviors. Controlling roles can be enacted through (a) **behavior control**, or setting guidelines and disciplining; (b) **decision making**, or choosing among options available to the family; (c) **boundary maintenance**, or deciding who is in or out of one's family circle; and (d) **financial-organization**, or managing the funds available to the family.

Behavior Control. As soon as children became active, it is imperative to set limits and provide guidance through discipline. The most striking illustration is the gate the mother erects to control access to unsafe areas of the house. Soon after a child is able to reason, however, rules for conduct are established and children are expected to behave within those (Baumrind, 1996). Although both parents can be active in the process of behavior control, usually one parent is the primary rule enforcer. Many children report that their father enforced the rules, but it was usually the mothers who made the rules and carried them out on a day-to-day basis. This makes sense in terms of the probability that the mother is in the home more often and provides the nurturing role, whereas the father is more often out of the home providing the resources to run the home. While the literature does not make clear who disciplines more, the preponderance of studies on discipline focus on mothers as the key socializing agent for children. However, we do know that fathers enact more stringent attempts at control; they are more likely to respond to children's noncompliance with punishment, and children, in turn, are more likely to obey their fathers (Grusec & Lytton, 1988). Consistently, children are more likely to obey their mothers in the presence of their fathers (Lytton, 1980). Mothers, alternatively, appear to use verbal admonishments, criticisms, and threats (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978). In a more authoritative vein, mothers may also attempt to reason with the child (Lytton, 1980). So although mothers may be the primary disciplinarians in the home, fathers may be more likely to use stronger threats of punishment.

Decision-Making, Family Boundary Maintenance, and Financial Organization. Similarly, usually one person is in charge of the decision making for the family. This person chooses among behavioral options for the family. These decisions can be as large as deciding where the annual vacation is going to be to as small as where the family buys most of its clothing. Regardless, this person carries a lot of power, in that his or her decisions affect the behavior and outcomes for the entire family. It is possible that mothers frequently carry out this role because of their greater involvement in house maintenance, but it is also possible that the father is the decision maker because of his role as resource provider. A certain amount of status and power is frequently accorded this role.

Family boundary maintenance. One further method of limiting behavioral options is through family boundary maintenance. Parents frequently attempt to control their child's environment to ensure what they deem to be the child's best behavior. Most of us remember that one friend who was not allowed to visit or with whom we were not allowed to associate. In this way, our parents decide who is and who is not acceptable for interacting with their children. The belief here is that children influence one another through their behavior. Family members are also limited in their interactions with other extended family members as well. Some children grow up without ever knowing their cousins, and sometimes their grandparents, because of existing family feuds. Perhaps not even in their conscious awareness, they are being limited to who is considered within or outside the family boundary. As a rather dramatic example, I grew up next to my uncle and aunt, but in a community of property lines and no fences, a fence was erected between our properties following a family feud concerning my grandparents' inheritance. I was allowed to play with Hope and Tom (my cousins), but it was clear that our parents would not speak. Such limitations are those of family boundary maintenance.

Tammy Afifi and Paul Schrodt (2003) argue that such family boundary maintenance may be especially relevant within families that include divorce. Parents move out, locks are often changed, and the exiting parent is often not permitted in the house, or when he or she is, they must obey new rules of entry such as knocking before coming in. As we have seen in Chapter 1, many government and social science agencies define families as "sharing a household." While problematic definitionally, this household includes geographic and material boundaries that distinguish who is in, and who is out, of one's family. Thus, the "leaving parent" or spouse may feel that he or she is no longer a part of the family because of being outside the boundary. This may become even more complicated when new spouses and stepparents and sometimes their children enter the family household and now nonbiologically related individuals are living together as one family. Physical boundaries are especially salient in divorced and stepfamilies.

Postdivorce and stepfamily situations also provide fertile ground for conflict over *rules/roles* and *privacy* boundaries (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003). Stepfamilies offer a potentially turbulent environment as children struggle with too many holders of the *same* role. The common refrain "you're not my mom/dad!" shouted at the top of one's lungs is a perfect example of a child telling a stepparent that he or she has overstepped the boundaries in trying to parent the child. In essence, the child is saying, "That's my mom's job; you are not my mom. My mom is part of my family and you are NOT." Consistently, postdivorce families and stepfamilies are rife with conflicts over privacy issues. Often, children protect the privacy of the parents in one household as a type of loyalty. I'll never forget the time Huw (my oldest

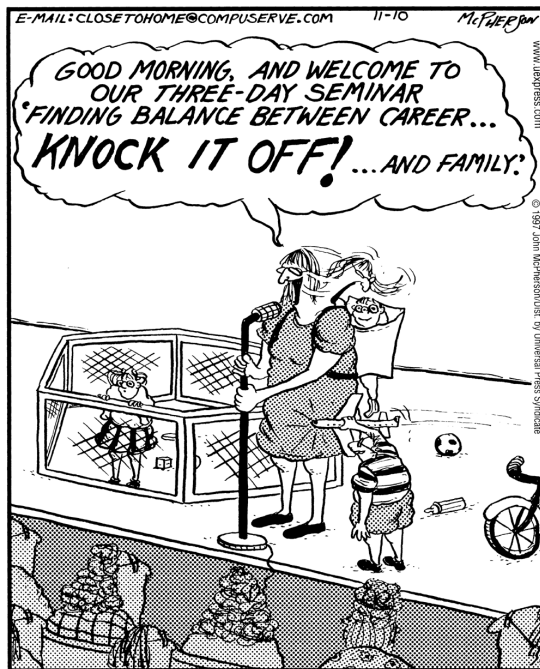
stepson) said, "I know . . ." and both my husband and I looked at him expectantly, and he said ". . . *stuff*." Eventually we learned that his mom and stepdad were soon to be married and surmised that this was the "stuff." He felt the strong need to protect the privacy of his mom even though the two families work hard together to have a conflict-free zone for the children's sake. Two years later, the boys maintained the privacy of their mom's pregnancy as well. Thus, children in stepfamilies and binuclear families have strong drives to protect the privacy, roles/rules, and physical boundaries across the families.

Financial organization. Finally, the financial organizer can be seen through the dictum, "He who holds the gold, rules." The person who manages the finances usually has a greater say in how finances are distributed and dictates how much is spent on which household or personal items. Some families manage to have two financial managers, but it is a rare couple that agrees on how to run the finances. Many couples find it easier to have one member in charge of this daunting task; disagreements over finances are always at the top of the list in terms of most frequent arguments (Newton & Burgoon, 1990). Therefore, usually one member of the household is responsible for organizing the finances.

The importance of the financial organizer is highlighted by the difference between dual-worker and dual-career couples. Whereas dual-career couples receive a salary (e.g., teachers, doctors, lawyers), dual-worker couples receive only an hourly wage. This produces strikingly different financial scenarios. Financial organizing is much more stressful for dual-worker couples who cannot expect exponential increases in salary at times that coincide with important life changes (e.g., adding a child, having a child start school or college). The financial organizer in the dual-worker couple has a greater challenge trying to manage the day-to-day finances while also planning for the future. The dual-worker couple is also more affected by financial stress in that they often cannot afford assistance with housework and child care that would allow them the luxury of more time to spend with their children. In this way, finances and the person who organizes them can have a profound effect on the quality of the communication in the family.

Organizing the finances can be particularly challenging in divorced families, where long, protracted legal battles can dictate the amount of finances devoted to each household. This can be particularly stressful in the step- or binuclear family because resources are now being devoted to biological and nonbiological children simultaneously. Communicationally, this can result in high levels of destructive conflict that may also include the children; parents have been known to ask children to ask the non-residential parent for the child support. These types of loyalty tests can put much strain on relations between the children and both of their parents.

*Dealing With Role Strain: Dual-Worker
and Dual-Career Families and Gender Roles*



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As we have seen previously, the roles of resource provider and nurturer are often highly gender biased, with the male expected to contribute most heavily to the economic side of the family and the female expected to contribute most heavily to the child care and household maintenance side of the family. Therefore, it is confusing and stressful for both members of the family dyad when the male and the female each contribute to the economic side of the family. However, this is often the case; 78% of workers are married to employed spouses, and in three quarters of these couples, spouses who are both employed full-time (Bond, Galinsky, & Swanberg, 1998). Some families adapt to this stressful situation by having the females adopt family-friendly jobs that allow them to work less and spend more time in the home (a *career-altering strategy*; Chait Barnett et al., 2003). This allows the woman the benefit of having roles that are not defined by the family and still having her family roles primarily dictate her sense of self. Others *work at home*, which blurs work and home boundaries and creates a stressful situation of its own. Some adopt a *family-altering strategy* of starting a family later (Helms-Erikson, 2001) or having fewer children (Chait Barnett et al.,

2003). Still others make the full commitment to work and pay the consequences of having less time and attention to devote to child care and household tasks. Regardless of the strategies adopted, maintaining both resource-providing and nurturing roles can have consequences in terms of interrole conflict and role strain.

A few concepts from roles theory are worth visiting here. The concepts of interrole conflict and role strain are particularly relevant to dual-worker (i.e., both workers are compensated hourly) or dual-career (i.e., both workers are paid a salary) heads of households (the most typical family form; Hayghe, 1990). **Interrole conflict** occurs whenever the performance of one role interferes with the performance of another role. Working mothers are well aware of interrole conflict because the expected behaviors associated with their jobs often prevent them from performing those expected behaviors associated with performance of the mother role. Being at the office, for instance, contradicts the need to be at home that many new mothers feel. Even now that my daughter is 2, I still feel the pressure to go into the house from the guest house where I'm working on this book where my nanny is attending to my daughter's nap instead of me. In terms of communication, constant attention to the whereabouts of an active toddler often takes away from the ability to focus singular attention on one's spouse who has a very important story to tell at the end of his or her stressful day. Both examples illustrate how behaviors associated with one role's performance can detract from the performance of another role held by the same role holder.



Figure 3.2 Time constraints are the biggest drawback that children of dual-career parents note, as exemplified by these parents hurrying to get themselves to work after getting the children off to school.

Although much literature emphasizes the fact that women have more interrole conflict than men (e.g., Almquist & Angrist, 1993; Arnold, 1993; Novack & Novack, 1996), evidence exists affirming that men are reporting that work and home are equal in terms of importance ("Study Finds," 2004). Furthermore, men report similar levels of work-home conflict as do women (Bond et al., 1998) and are now as likely as women to have made career sacrifices in favor of family responsibilities (Moen, 1999; Twenge, 1997). Interrole conflict is a tangible issue for both men and women in dual-career situations.

Work relationships can also interfere with marital relationships and cause interrole conflict in that way. This pattern has been explained by the work-family spillover model, which postulates that a marital partner's stress, emotions, or experiences at work or home spill over into the other domain (Larson & Almeida, 1999). Three processes by which work has been identified to interfere with home life include time interference, energy interference, and psychological interference (Small & Riley, 1990). *Time interference* represents time at work diminishing time at home. *Energy interference* refers to fatigue associated with work that diminishes the energy the spouse has to devote to the home and the spousal relationship. *Psychological interference* refers to absorption with work concerns that takes away from the mental energy available for the home relationship. In an attempt to study this model, Dumas, Margolin, and John (2003) found that in general, spouses reported more positive marital interactions on days when they worked less, were more energetic, ate more, and relaxed more. They also found that wives were more reactive to their husbands' work stress than vice versa. It is likely that this work-family spillover stress exists in all families that include dual earners.

Role strain typically occurs when one either feels uncomfortable with one's role or does not entirely know how to enact the behaviors associated with one's roles. This can result in a less than optimum performance associated with that role. New spouses and new parents often struggle to understand the complexities of all they are expected to accomplish under the role of wife/husband or mother/father. Consistently, new stepparents are especially prone to this role strain as they struggle to adapt to the role of stepparent. Although "stepparent" already implies that they are one step away from being a real parent, they are now trying to enact behaviors as if they *are* a parent. The enactment of communication and behaviors associated with this role is particularly difficult. Not only does the new stepparent not "feel" like a parent yet, but the children may actively resist this role as they try to maintain the previously established boundary of their old family (as discussed under boundary maintenance roles). As noted previously, self-perceived competency in one's role as father enhanced the degree of involvement fathers had with their children (Huston & Vangilisti, 1995). Role strain can be associated with diminished competencies and time devoted to that role. In other words, if parents and stepparents don't perceive themselves as competent in those roles, they are less likely to *communicate and behave* in ways that are consistent with that role.

One thing that can help alleviate these pressures is the relationship of role holders to other role holders. This may help explain why two-parent homes provide better outcomes for children. For instance, spouses who hold **complementary roles** feel less pressure to perform behaviors associated with potentially competing roles. Complementary role holders generally perform opposing behaviors that help facilitate the opposite role. More traditional nuclear families that have the woman as the primary nurturer for the children and the man as the primary resource provider will feel less interrole conflict, for instance, because they each perform behaviors that do not detract from, but rather add to, the performance of the other role. Nurturer and resource provider roles complement each other in that both members have clear guidelines for their behavior and know they can rely on the other for the fulfillment of the necessary opposing task. Nurturers can stay at home and take care of their children because the other parent is out earning the money to support the family. Resource providers can be absent from the home for the better part of the work week because they know that their partner is at home looking after the children. Both roles are necessary but are being fulfilled by a different role holder, and thus, the behaviors of the various roles do not contradict each other within the same person. In support of the greater ease of this complementary role relationship, the majority of couples support the view that the woman should be the nurturer and the husband should be the primary provider (MacDermid et al., 1990). A lack of complementary role holder can be at the heart of much role strain for single-parent head of families.

Reciprocal role holders may find a similar balance to complementary role holders in that reciprocal role holders alternate opposing tasks so that each is performing only one role at a time. A school teacher who works 9 months a year (resource provider) and has a stay-at-home spouse (nurturer) who then goes out to his or her house-painting job for the other 3 months (resource provider) while the school teacher stays at home (nurturer) is a great example of a family with reciprocal role holders. Both partners perform nurturing and resource provision, but while they are performing their role, the other partner performs the opposing task. Thus, no two partners are resource providers and nurturers simultaneously.

Families that find themselves in the increasingly common dual-worker or dual-career situation more typically assume **symmetrical roles**. When two members of the same family perform the same role, these roles are said to be symmetrical. When both parents are resource providers, they are symmetrical role holders. Generally, both members feel more pressure to also be symmetrical role holders with regard to nurturing, but it is unlikely that both will be truly symmetrical in this sense. Although men perform more household duties when their spouse works (Perry-Jenkins, Pierce, & Goldberg, 2004), it is still likely that women perform far more behaviors associated with child care and housework (Huston & Holmes, 2004). Huston and Holmes report that working mothers were employed an average of 30 hours a week while

performing 26 household and child care tasks, whereas their husbands worked 34-hour weeks and performed about 5 household and child care tasks. Although both family members share resource provision, they do not share equally the nurturing responsibilities within the household. It is worthwhile remembering, however, that the *perception* of relational and psychological shared parenting is more important in predicting marital satisfaction than is the actual division of the child care tasks (Ehrenberg et al., 2001).

Finally, the effects of dual-career couples are not limited to interrole conflict and role strain. There are other potential effects for wives, husbands, and children as well. Working wives are physically and psychologically healthier (Holland Benin & Edwards, 1990), more physically active (Kessler & McRae, 1982), have higher self-esteem, and feel less social isolation (Burke & Weir, 1976). They also feel less economically dependent on their husbands and are less likely to garner their identities from their husbands and children. Furthermore, it has been found that wives who earn more than their husbands may potentially threaten their husbands' self-esteem (Menaghan, 1982). On the other hand, children from dual-earner homes rate their families as high in family strength, supportiveness, and concern (Greenstein, 1990), as well as in lessons of versatility and flexibility (Ford, 1983). Children's reports about the situation are not entirely rosy, however; they also note that their families had many time constraints (Knaub, 1986). Thus, dual-earner families have unique challenges and strengths compared with single-earner families. It is likely that the effects of dual-earner households are consistent across nuclear, step- and binuclear families and families with gay heads of household.

Family Systems Theory

Whereas roles theory provides us with an individual-level explanation for why family members behave the way they do, family systems theory stresses that the whole of the family is more important relative to the individual contributions each family member provides. Family systems theory is derived from a more general systems theory that argues that systems (of which families are one example) can be understood only in their entirety. In this way, the concepts of wholeness, interdependence, and homeostasis are all central to understanding the mechanisms of family systems theory. The systems theory concept of **wholeness** emphasizes that "the sum of the whole is greater than the individual parts." Thus, families can be understood not through individual members' experiences (which can vary widely from one another—think "beloved sister" and "black sheep" here) but, rather, through the unique dynamics and overall climate achieved in a family; that is, families should be measured at the system level (e.g., size, rigidity, climate) rather than at the individual family level (e.g., perceptions of satisfaction, emotional experiences). A family systems theorist would argue that one can never fully know the inside mechanisms of a family unless one is fully enmeshed in that system.

The system's theory concept of **interdependence** stresses the intricate and necessary interrelationships of family members. Interdependence stresses that family members rely on one another to promote the functioning of the family. Borrowing from the concepts of roles theory, this becomes evident in two-parent households, where one parent is the resource provider and the other is the nurturer-caregiver. Both functions *must* be achieved for the family to function, so both parents rely on one another, and the children rely on both of the parents. In addition, the parents rely on the children to define their roles as caregiver and provider. In other words, they could not function as nurturers or providers without the children in the complementary roles.

The concept of homeostasis (balance) stresses the nature of families as goal-attaining systems. The primary assumption here is that families have *goals* (e.g., well-raised children, social and emotional well-being, family satisfaction) and set about to attain them. The concept of **homeostasis** emphasizes the balance that families attempt to achieve as they set about attaining these goals. The 15-year-old daughter who becomes pregnant and runs off to Las Vegas to marry the tattooed plumber who fixed the family bathroom last summer sets the family off balance in terms of attaining the educational goals that they perceive will provide their family members with greater physical and emotional well-being. Thus, family members will set about attempting to regain balance within the family system. In a situation where regaining balance is more attainable, a father may restrict a son who snuck out in the middle of the night and took the family car for a joy ride that ended in a police car in order to attempt to regain control over the son's future well-being. Discipline may be seen as an attempt to regain balance within the family and move individual family members toward attainment of socioemotional competence. Most important from a family communication standpoint, Broderick (1993) articulates several characteristics of a social system that make families unique compared with other nonsocial systems. First, families use *communication*, which functions to connect the self-aware, self-directed, independent identities within the families. Second, families must use *psychopolitical negotiation* to achieve joint decisions by members with individual needs and independent wills. Thus, families require a far more elaborate executive mechanism than is found in other types of systems. Third, *attributions* regarding families must be made at the social systems level. In other words, attributions about a system are different (e.g., size, rigidity, development) from those of individuals (e.g., marital satisfaction). Fourth, families use *social distance regulation* as they approach and avoid members within the family and across family boundaries.

Families as Self-Regulatory Goal-Attaining Systems

Broderick (1993) further outlines family systems theory with an emphasis on explaining goal attainment in the family through self-regulatory attempts. Family systems theory assumes that families seek goals and set

about trying to attain them. Goals can be higher order, such as the health and well-being of family members, or lower order, such as having a nice home, taking a family vacation each year, or attaining good educations for the children. Thus, families set goals and self-regulate the family in pursuit of those goals. According to Broderick, several principles characterize families as goal-seeking systems: (a) families pursue goals, (b) families select goals and mobilize support, (c) someone must execute the movement toward these goals, and (d) progress must be monitored and corrections made for deviations from the goal destination. An illustration will make this more obvious. Consider my friend Candace's extended family. The Medefind family has the higher-order goal of health and well-being of all family members. To achieve this higher order-goal, the lower-order goal of family gatherings is encouraged. Traditionally, the adult daughters are mobilized to organize the events, but ultimately the eldest Mrs. Medefind executes the events through telephone calls and so on. In addition, all family members are relied on to provide the refreshments. My good friend, Candace, aware that the rule for such events was to bring a moderate portion of food with only sufficient amounts to divvy this food up equally among partygoers, made numerous attempts to get all family members to provide larger amounts of food so that the children were not limited to one cookie each, for example. This, however, was not seen as being in line with the lower-order goal of family gatherings, and the eldest Mrs. Medefind swooped in to correct this deviation from the goal. She mobilized both her eldest daughter and her eldest daughter-in-law to telephone this errant daughter-in-law (Candace) to attempt to get her back in line with the group by providing only the minimum amount of food required and accepting that the others would as well. Through this example, we can see the selected goal (family events with minimum amounts of food), the mobilization of support (the daughters organizing the events), the execution of the movement toward the goal (Mrs. Medefind), the monitoring of the progress toward the goal (Mrs. Medefind), and corrections for deviations from the goal (Mrs. Medefind via the eldest daughters). Even through mundane family examples such as this, family systems principles of goal attainment and self-regulation can be observed.

Broderick (1993) delineates six models regarding goal attainment within the family. These include the *normative model*, the *developmental task model*, the *psychopolitical model*, the *opportunity matrix model*, the *reflexive spiral model*, and the *unified transcybernetic model*. All these models enhance our understanding of how families go about the business of setting goals and self-regulating in the attainment of them. These models should generalize across various family forms and should thus be applicable to cohabiting couples, married couples with no children, gay couples and families, nuclear families, single-parent families, blended or binuclear families, and extended families.

The Normative Model. The normative model assumes that the mechanism of self-regulation within the family is the social norm that operates on three

levels: (a) socialization/induction (*guilt*), (b) induction of social sanctions (*shame*), and (c) formal penalties (*fear*). Thus, family members are induced to behave in line with their family's goals because of norms of society inculcated in the individual, because of the results of deviations from the norm, and through coercion. Family members submit to the goals of the group because they will feel guilty if they don't, they will be shamed if they don't, or they will be punished if they don't. For example, a daughter can engage in less risky sexual behavior than she desires (to maintain the family goal of healthy well-educated family members) either through guilt (she'll feel miserable if she is riskier), shame (her parents make her feel miserable when they catch her in compromising positions with what's-his-name), or fear (she's afraid she'll get caught and won't be able to see her boyfriend for a year). Therefore, according to the normative model, the primary motivator for acting in line with family goals is following the norm.

The Developmental Task Model. Broderick (1993) asserts that norms are not the only mechanisms regulating family members' behavior but that developmental issues also come into play. According to the developmental task model, family goals grow out of the family's adjustments to the interaction of three forces: (a) evolving individual developmental needs of family members, (b) shifting normative prescriptions as families progress from one life cycle stage to another, and (c) changing challenges imposed by changing family structure and situations. Therefore, goal-directed behaviors change over time in families as individual members develop and as the developmental stage of the family changes. For example, individual family members may be influenced by the developmental stage they are experiencing. My husband, for instance, says that the process of raising a child at this stage of life (he's 47) is much different from the first time around when he was 29. At that point in his life, he felt much more pressure to be the resource provider than he does at this stage when his career is well developed and he knows he can count on his salary to continue to increase at critical junctures in our sons'/stepsons' and daughter's lives. Therefore, he spends more time in the nurturing role with our daughter than he was able to do early on with my stepsons because he doesn't have to expend so much time and effort worrying about being the primary resource provider. His individual-level developmental needs affect the overall lower-order goal of spending more leisure time together.

Furthermore, the developmental or life stage of the family also affects the goals that are operating at any given time. Couples with no children right after marriage have goals to maintain a positive living environment, but that goal may become much more important after they learn they are about to become parents. Again, resource provision may become more salient in that the father in particular may feel more pressure to earn more money to provide the type of shelter necessary for raising little "Sara." Money that previously would have been funneled into fun leisure time activities will now be spent on new houses or refurbishing rooms to prepare them for baby.

Alternatively, so-called empty nesters may sell their current abode (much to the consternation of their adult children) because they don't need the space they once had. Life stage of the family can similarly affect the goals a family enacts or emphasizes at any current time. The developmental task model focuses on the influences of individual-level and family life stage developmental issues and how they influence goal-seeking and attainment in the family.

The Psychopolitical Model. The psychopolitical model's primary difference from the normative and developmental task models is that it assumes that individuals within the same family may share the same overarching family goals, but their individual wills and desires are frequently a source of conflict and differences about the best ways to *achieve* those goals. This model recognizes the unique contributions of individual family members in that it assumes that (a) family members have quite independent needs, opinions, and agendas; (b) consensus can never be taken for granted and may be achieved only through conscious, purposeful negotiation among family members; (c) individual agendas, priorities, strategies, judgments, and political resources are the central factors involved in determining outcomes within the family; and (d) norms of the larger society (as well as constraints imposed by the family's present situation) enter the process only as they might be reflected in the individual member's priorities (Broderick, 1993).

Anyone who has ever lived in a family and tried to negotiate a family vacation can appreciate this model. Basically, families can have goals and the means to attain them and still find their individual members at great odds with one another regarding the methods with which to achieve these goals. In other words, a family and its constituents can all desire the emotional well-being of its members and can see the benefit of achieving this goal through a family vacation. Discussions surrounding the venue for this vacation, however, can become quite heated and may seem to actually detract from emotional well-being in that one member may be very angry with the location, activities, or length of the family vacation. This again points toward the developmental task model, as well; my oldest stepson, for example, was very accommodating of family vacations *until* he had a girlfriend. Subsequently, wherever we went didn't matter as much as his accessibility to AIM (AOL instant messaging) and *any* length was too long! You may have experienced similarly heated debates over the age of your first date or the negotiations over your curfew. Parents and children most certainly both want to maintain the well-being of the children in a family, but over the years, they most undoubtedly will have disagreements over the methods that will allow them to achieve it. Adolescent development is necessarily a time when individual wills, agendas, and priorities become central to ensuing family goals. However, competing wills, needs, and political agendas can be operating in individual family members at any time in the family's or individual's development.

The Opportunity Matrix Model. The opportunity matrix model grew out of the observation that family actions are substantially shaped by the configuration of the immediate spatial, temporal, material, and social environment (Broderick, 1993). In other words, it's fine to *want* the best possible health care for your children, but if you don't have the resources, basically, it's not going to happen. Family form may be especially salient here; for example, single-parent households may not have the income or the insurance benefits allowing them the best health care. The underlying principle of the opportunity matrix model is that all human action may be thought of as occurring at the intersection of an intention *and* an opportunity. This opportunity structure is a function of four potential components:

1. *Spatial configuration* (i.e., characteristics of the accessible physical environment)
2. *Temporal patterning* (e.g., imposition of routines, schedules, calendars)
3. *Material milieu* (availability of material objects and utilities—food, furniture, fixtures, vehicles, weapons, tools, etc.)
4. *Social milieu* (presence or accessibility of particular social categories of individuals—e.g., parents, pastors, police officers) (Broderick, 1993)

In other words, if you want your children to be healthy (higher-order goal), and you see playing outside as part of achieving that health (lower-order goal), but you live in a high-rise tenement with no backyard and in a bad neighborhood, then this limitation in spatial configuration will make it less likely that you will be able to attain this family goal. Similarly, your family may see individual rooms as essential to the development of adolescent autonomy and esteem, but if the family has four children and only three bedrooms, this goal will again be limited by spatial opportunities.

Furthermore, you may be a father who is primarily responsible for resource provision—with all the attending pressures that entails. Your family may also have the goal of creating less traditionally sex-typed children, and thus, you may want to spend as much time with your children providing child care as does your wife who also works. However, given the pressures and demands of your job on your daily schedule as well as the pressures to travel for work that your high-paying professional career requires, you simply will not have the time necessary to care for your children to the same extent as your wife (à la the work-family spillover model). Your family goals are thus thwarted by time constraints.

Third, your family may not have the resources available to provide for the health care and educational well-being of your children. The fact remains that 39% of female-headed families with children live below the poverty line as do 7% of married couples with children. Therefore, many families may find themselves in the position that their financial means do not allow them

to achieve their desired ends. There are children living in poorer areas, attending less challenging schools, who are simply less likely to go to college because their families did not have the money to move to a better neighborhood with a better school. Frankly put, some goals are simply not attainable without the funds to support them.

Finally, your family may not be able to attain its goals because it does not have the social networks necessary. A family, for instance, may want their children to have a close-knit extended family that lives nearby and provides physical, emotional, and psychological support to family. However, the realities of our ever-increasing mobility make it less likely that this familial social support will be there. Therefore, the social milieu is simply not available. Social restrictions also affect families who want to raise children with liberal values while living, for example, in the South. It *is* possible, but less likely than while living in alternative areas where more liberal values are endemic to the social environment. You can see, then, that one's spatial, temporal, material, and social resources can severely limit the type of familial goal attainment possible.

Reflexive Spiral Model. The reflexive spiral model assumes that families commonly and repetitively engage in patterns of interaction that lead toward outcomes that bear no obvious relationship to the values or goals of any family members—often seeming in opposition to family goals. This model features the unmediated, reflexive reactivity of family members to one another's inputs (Broderick, 1993). Therefore, family members' behavior may often be less affected by their personal goals and values than by their interpersonal reflexes. For example, although hostility of family members to each other may be in opposition to the attainment of the emotional well-being of the family members, it is quite likely that individual family members will be hostile toward each other from time to time. In the reflexive spiral model, hostility levels of various members are seen to be a function of the following:

1. *Escalation factors* (e.g., other family members' hostility and individual level reactivity)
2. *Dampening factors* (e.g., the costs of one's own level of hostility)
3. *Contingency factors* (e.g., historic grievances or positive experiences)

Depending on the various combinations of escalation, dampening, and contingency factors, stability, positive outcomes, or runaway escalations of hostility can result. More specifically, if a husband's *escalation factors* (his wife is relatively hostile today and he's had a really, really bad day at work and is feeling particularly reactive) are greater than his *dampening factors* (he knows his wife will dismiss his mood as having a bad day and not take it out on him later with her own harangue or withdrawal of sexual favors) and a *history of past grievances* is present (the garbage disposal has clogged for the

100th time in 2 years and no one has done anything about it—*again*), then, not all that surprisingly, the husband's expressions of hostility will erupt. All this is regardless of the husband's desires for a harmonious home with a stable happy family that does not include any expressions of negative emotions at all. This model is particularly insightful regarding familial goal attainment, because rational goal attainment is much easier to articulate than to achieve when those messy emotional reactions start getting in the way. This model reminds us that our familial goals and our actual behavior will not always be consistent with one another as we seek to achieve those goals.

Unified Transcybernetic Model. Finally, the unified transcybernetic model combines the best of all the above models into the most complete family systems theory explanatory calculus. Basically, this model incorporates norms, developmental task processes, psychopolitical negotiation, opportunity matrices, and reflexive spirals into one complete theoretical model explaining goal-seeking and self-regulatory behavior in families. The unified transcybernetic model postulates (a) that the cybernetic functions of goal selection, goal seeking, and self-regulating interact with a family's opportunity matrix such that family members interact with each other in patterned ways (both goal-directed behaviors and reflexive-vectored behaviors included) and (b) that the family executive function and status-mentoring functions are emergent by-products of the psychopolitical process (Broderick, 1993). Finally, this model assumes that individual-level needs, developmental factors, social pressures, and shifts in the family opportunity structure all affect family patterns. A family is goal-seeking and self-regulatory to the extent that norms, development, psychopolitical factors, opportunities, and reflexive patterns of behavior allow. For example, a family will achieve its goal of physical health and well-being, if, and only if, the following are true for that family:

1. The norms of the situation influence the family in a healthy lifestyle (e.g., gyms are us).
2. Developmentally, the family is at such a place that all members have the time, energy, and inclination to exercise and eat properly (e.g., typically *not* right after the birth of the first child),
3. Psychopolitically, family members have similar agendas, wills, needs, and wants (yeah, right!),
4. The family has the spatial, temporal, material, and social resources necessary (e.g., no one has cancer or some other life-threatening illness most likely out of their control).
5. No reflexively mediated processes are causing family members to behave in ways that are antithetical to the family goals (e.g., family members are not having bad days or in other ways responding negatively to past grievances that are rearing their ugly heads).

In sum, family systems theory provides us with a complete model capable of explaining, predicting, describing, and controlling family members' goal attainment and self-regulation. As a theory, it fulfills all the functions of theory and can help us most fully understand the goal-seeking behavior of families, regardless of their various forms.

Rules Theory



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Just as roles guide our behavior, rules of communication shape how we communicate with various family members. According to Shimanoff (1980), a **rule** is “a followable prescription that indicates what behavior is obligated, preferred, and prohibited” (p. 57). Applying this to families, rules inform us regarding the best way to verbally talk to, or nonverbally communicate with, other members of our family. In this way, rules help us know that we are *obligated* to tell our mothers what time we will be home and with whom we are going out. Rules also help us know that within families, it is *preferred* that we communicate in pleasant (as opposed to unpleasant and hostile) ways. Finally, rules help us know that swearing at our mothers or sharing the most intimate details regarding our sex lives is strictly *prohibited*. Rules theory has a long-standing tradition within communication (e.g., Cushman, 1977) and will be highly useful to consider in its application to family communication.

Verbal Rules of Communication

Rules regarding verbal communication within the family can prescribe appropriate behavior and prohibit others. These rules can be either explicit or implicit (Smith, 1982). *Explicit rules* are openly discussed and agreed on. In most families, there are well-stated rules about communicating whereabouts with adolescent children who are gaining independence. My two adolescent

stepsons, for instance, know that they must communicate where they are going, who they are going with, and what time they can be expected home. After verbally communicating this information, they are also well aware that if any of these plans change, they are to inform one of their parents immediately. These explicit rules are clearly stated and well-understood. *Implicit rules*, however, are more subtle and are understood in unstated ways. For example, my husband and I never ever say anything remotely negative about their mother in front of the children. Nowhere is this rule explicitly communicated or documented. However, this rule is well understood; in fact, my eldest stepson complained to me about it as he was talking about the painful process of disentangling himself from his mother as he emotionally prepares to go to college in the fall. In turn, my stepchildren rarely talk about their mother or stepfather in derogatory terms in my house. This again was never stated explicitly; however, we all understand that loyalty among coparents and between parents and children prescribes such behavior.

Although verbal rules in families are extensive and cannot be covered in their entirety here, two examples bear mentioning. First, explicit and implicit rules are most highly apparent between adolescent children and their parents. As adolescents strive for autonomy from their parents, explicit rules regarding territorial markers become more evident, with many early teens resorting to hand-scrawled signs reading “Keep Out!” or “Enter at your own risk!” posted clearly on bedroom doors (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995). Implicit rules also abound with well-understood and unstated prescriptions regarding taboo topics with adults. For instance, although gender of parent and gender of child can have a significant influence, in general, adolescents avoid talking about sex and dangerous situations with their parents (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995). However, if adolescents do talk with their parents about sexual matters, they are more likely to do so with mothers than with fathers, and mothers are generally more effective at getting their kids to actually reduce their sexually risky behavior (e.g., Miller et al., 2001). Thus, while explicit and implicit rules abound throughout the developmental life span of the family, they are especially apparent during adolescence.

Nonverbal Rules of Communication

Nonverbal communication may be similarly dictated by explicit and implicit rules. Nonverbal communication includes **kinesics**, or overall use of the body, including gestures and posture. For instance, insulting hand gestures and slumping postures may be explicitly prohibited within a family, whereas animated facial expressions may be implicitly encouraged. **Vocalics**, or communication through the use of voice, can similarly be dictated by explicit or implicit rules of communication. How many times, for instance, have you heard a mother say explicitly to a loud child, “Indoor voice!” Still other mothers, however, try to communicate this message through the more subtle means of implicitly teaching the rule by using a lowered, quieter voice

herself in hopes that the errant child will match her tone. **Proximity**, or communication through the use of space, is another type of nonverbal communication in the family that will be dictated by explicit and implicit rules. Standing too close, for instance, may be subtly discouraged through compensatory steps backward and not entering your parents' bedroom when the door is shut may be explicitly stated and understood. **Haptics**, or communication through the use of touch, may be similarly prescribed explicitly and implicitly. One parent may be highly affectionate, whereas the other is less affectionate. Over time, children implicitly learn which parent is more receptive to hugs and kisses. Alternatively, parents no doubt spend time explicitly teaching close-talking, highly intimately touching 3-year-olds not to touch there! Finally, parents can implicitly or explicitly communicate rules regarding **chronemics**, or communication through the use of time, and **artifacts**, or communication through the use of physical objects. In other words, parents may have explicit rules about time limitations on television or computer usage, but they may also have implicit rules about the extent to which sexually explicit depictions are allowed on the walls of their house.

Summary

Theories regarding family communication can be highly useful in terms of helping us describe, predict, explain, and control family communication and its outcomes. Although innumerable theories are useful in family communication research, three theories are highlighted here because they are particularly useful in helping us have the best understanding of family communication. *Roles theory* helps us understand the roles that various members hold as they aid the family's functioning through their communication behavior. Traditional gender role delineations help us further understand the tendency for men to adopt resource provider roles and for women to adopt nurturer-caregiver roles even when the family is a dual-earning household. The dual-earning household is a particularly challenging family situation, where members often experience interrole conflict and work-family spillover stress. Roles theory also helps us understand the complexity within single-parent homes when family members are expected to hold competing roles (e.g., resource provider *and* nurturer) simultaneously. Furthermore, roles theory helps us better understand boundary regulation in families—a concept that holds special relevance for step- and binuclear families. *Family systems theory* helps us understand families as goal seeking and self-regulating. This theory also helps us understand the many factors (e.g., norms, psychopolitical processes, opportunities, developmental processes, reflexive behavioral spirals) that influence how families achieve their overarching goals (e.g., health, well-being). These theories help us understand family functioning regardless of the form of the family. Finally, *rules theory* helps us understand the explicit and implicit rules that prescribe,

obligate, and prohibit us in the ways we communicate with various family members. These explicit and implicit rules are evident at both verbal and nonverbal levels and operate within all family forms.

KEY TERMS

back stage	prediction
complementary roles	psychopolitical model
control	reciprocal roles
description	reflexive spiral model
developmental task model	role expectations
dual-earner couples	role strain
explanation	roles
explicit rules	roles theory
family systems theory	rules theory
front stage	stress
gender-linked roles	symmetrical roles
implicit rules	theory
interrole conflict	unified transcybernetic
nonverbal communication	verbal communication
normative model	wings
opportunity matrix model	work-family spillover
performance	

QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION

1. Using the concepts from roles theory, analyze your family of origin. Who were the primary nurturers, resource providers, and so on? Did your family have symmetrical, complementary, or reciprocal role holders?
2. Analyze the gender role specialization in your family. Who was the primary nurturer-caregiver? Who was the primary resource provider? Did both of your parents work? If so, who worked the most? Who nurtured the most?
3. Depict your family members as a mobile. Analyze your family according to family systems theory using the concepts of wholeness, interdependence, and homeostasis. How did the behavior of one member of this highly connected system affect the behavior of the other members? How did your family seek goals and self-regulate in pursuit of those goals?
4. Differentiate between normative, developmental task, psychopolitical, opportunity matrix, reflexive spiral, and unified transcybernetic models of self-regulating goal seeking in families. Using the concepts from these models, which factors most influenced how your own family of origin sought goals?
5. What rules were operating in your family of origin as you grew up? What were some examples of explicit rules? Implicit rules? Are there also examples of verbal and nonverbal explicit and implicit rules you can provide? Were these rules particularly evident during your adolescent years?