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Toward a Theory of Family Communication

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Abstract

In this manuscript, we develop a theory of family communication that is based on the schematic representation of relational knowledge. We first discuss pertinent issues surrounding family communication and then develop a general model of the role of relational schemas for interpersonal communication. Taking the specific environment of family communication into consideration, we then develop a theory of family communication that is based on family relationship schemas and describe the schema's location, content, and role in family communication.

Introduction

Researchers and theorists who study the family generally agree that the values, social constraints, and behaviors that affect family structures have changed a great deal over the past two decades. The ability of families to survive these changes suggests that families are flexible and that their flexibility is aided by how family members communicate. Furthermore, although a number of the functions of the family have been delegated to other social agencies, families are expected to nurture one another and provide caregiving and support. Whether conceived of as a process of making facts mutually manifest (Sperber & Wilson, 1986) or of developing and sustaining definitions of reality in relationships (Berger & Kellner, 1994), communication plays a central role in the family.

Despite this obvious importance of family communication, there are no theories of family communication *per se*, although there is a growing body of excellent, theoretically driven research on various topics in this arena (Fitzpatrick & Vangelisti, 1995). The purpose of this manuscript is to attempt to fill this lacuna by developing a theory of family communication that builds on the advances made in the area of the schematic representation of relational knowledge in human cognition and that takes the unique family communication environment into consideration. To that end, we first provide some background concept explication work on the key terms and come to a couple conclusions about the relevance of intersubjectivity and interactivity for family communication theories. We then explore relational theories that employ relationship schemas and develop a general theoretical model of communication that is based on the mental representation of relational knowledge and propose a set of axioms for that general theory. Finally, based on the general theory and under consideration of the specific communication environment faced by families, we formulate our own theory of family communication.

Conceptual Terrain

Theoretical work on communication is important for understanding the dynamics of the modern family. Because the family is in many ways a unique context for human communication, theorists are forced to examine a broad range of issues, starting with a consideration of the meaning of the terms “family” and “communication.” Both of these terms are infamously broad ones: because everyone knows what they are, everyone has a different idea of how they are defined.

Family. In the past few decades, numerous social changes have caused us to reconsider our definitions of the family. Noller and Fitzpatrick (1993) extensively discuss and elaborate upon classes of definitions of the family noted by Wamboldt and Reiss (1989). In some scientific investigations, there has been a gradual advance from structural to transaction based definitions. In other words, rather than see the family as comprised of individuals connected primarily through legal and biological ties, the family is increasingly defined as a group of intimates who generate a sense of home and group identity, and experience a history and a future. This transactional definition opens up the boundaries of the family and allows the researcher to include a variety of different family types and forms in the analysis (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1993).

The changing definition of family, however, not only has implications for the breadth phenomena researchers investigate, but also for the theories they develop. In effect, transactional definitions are only a reflection of the tremendous variance of how families define themselves. This variance, then, requires a maximal flexibility in how family is conceptualized in theories of family communication. Not only because theories that are based on more restrictive assumptions, for example, that families are composed of two heterosexual adults and their children, exclude a significant number of differently composed families, but also because they are operating with a definition of family that has little ecological validity. As a result, the validity of the entire theory is questionable.

Communication. Definitions of human communication are as problematic as are definitions of the family. Most theorists define communication in such a way that it includes any instance of the creation of symbols in some medium in such a fashion that other people can notice the symbols and make sense of them. At a minimum, then, communication theories will be concerned with symbols, the cognitive processes by which they are created and interpreted, and the social conventions governing the relationship of the symbol to the referent.

By "symbol" we mean any patterned alteration of the physical environment that stands in some regularized relationship to any concept or idea, and can thus be used to represent, or stand in place of, that concept or idea. The medium (that which is altered) may be an integral part of the symbol (as the diamond and the gold are an integral part of an engagement ring) or the symbol may be entirely independent of the medium (as the letters of the alphabet carry the same import regardless of whether they are formed in ink on paper or engraved in stone). The relationship between symbol and referent may be generally known by many people, as the above examples illustrate, or they may be known to only a few or even only one person, as the ciphers in a private coded diary or the "in-jokes" shared by intimates.

The symbolic nature of communication makes central the process by which ideas are given symbolic or representational forms and the converse process by which symbols are recognized and interpreted. The simplest perspectives on this issue are various code models of communication (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1993). A qualitatively different model of communication, the inferential model, is based on the idea that many, perhaps most, symbols are fundamentally ambiguous (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). In this model, communication competence consists of directing other's attention toward facts from which certain inferences are likely to be drawn. Discourse comprehension depends on one's knowledge of the plans and goals of the participants in the interaction. Listeners supply missing information from their knowledge base, including general world knowledge, knowledge of the context of the speaker, and what has already occurred in the present sequence of utterances.

In other words, the inferential model of communication suggests that symbols must be recognized and interpreted through rather complex cognitive processes involving form, recognition, memory, and so forth. The entire process requires the ability to make inferences about the intentions behind the use of a symbol, which are based on an understanding of social conventions governing the use of certain symbols, the relationship between sender and receiver, and the sender's and the receiver's idiosyncrasies. Similarly, the process of choosing symbols to communicate also relies on the sender's ability to predict how the intended receiver will react to a symbol, which involves the same types of knowledge of social conventions, the relationship between sender and receiver, and their idiosyncrasies.

Communication starts with a set of premises and leads to conclusions warranted by the premises. The inferential model suggests that communicators do not respond merely to the symbol: they also analyze the relevant features of the pragmatic contexts. Understanding occurs both as a bottom-up process (given the statement and its semantic interpretation) and as a top-down process (given previous knowledge and expectations of various kinds). Thus, the inferential model of communication offers intriguing possibilities for deriving unique theories of family communication. To the extent that the family embodies a rich and distinct set of expectations or relevancies, the inferential model provides a rich basis for distinguishing family communication from communication in other contexts. As a result, the theorist is faced with the challenge of accounting for the manner in which distinct features of the family affect: (1) family members' expectations; (2) the structure of relevancies within the family; and (3) how the family context itself shapes the inferences drawn by family members.

The family communication environment. In light of these challenges, a complete explication of family communication needs to consider both intersubjectivity and interactivity (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1993). Intersubjectivity refers to the sharing of cognitions among participants in a communicative event, whereas interactivity refers to the degree to which symbol creation and interpretation are linked. Because communication is a process that takes place

simultaneously within a social unit and between cognitive units, an adequate theoretical account of family communication must account for both intersubjectivity and interactivity. That is, it must contain a cognitive element that explains intersubjectivity, and a communication element that explains how family members create, shape and maintain the social unit through their responses to each others' actions. Thus, for families, interactivity refers to the way in which a family maintains its own structure through patterns of the family members' responses to each others' communicative acts.

Accounting for both intersubjectivity and interactivity in one theory is a greater challenge that it appears from the outside, because interactivity is not a necessary consequence of intersubjectivity. In fact, Interactivity need imply nothing about intersubjectivity. Even if absolutely no intersubjectivity is assumed, interactivity will be high if (1) individuals base their own actions on their predictions of other individuals' actions and (2) alter those predictions according to their observations of what other individuals actually do. In other words, whereas interactivity requires a cognitive representation of others (including their behavior, motives, responses, etc.), these representations do not necessarily have to be shared with the other persons.

Both intersubjectivity and interactivity reflect in a unique way a pair of linked problems in communication theory: (1) what is the appropriate unit of observation and analysis: the individual or the communicative relationship; and (2) is the behavior of individuals in a communicative relationship best conceptualized as autonomous or interdependent? If the fundamental problem in communication theory is taken to be conversation, then the question is expressed as follows: Is it most useful to conceive of a conversation as a single complex social episode or as a cognitive sequence of reaction-anticipation-preaction episodes, linked only in the memories and plans of the individual participants? A focus on intersubjectivity leads scholars to examine cognitive processes at the individual level, whereas a focus on interactivity leads scholars to focus on behaviors linked together in the couple of the family. We intend to consider both intersubjectivity and interactivity in our theoretical work on family communication.

Developing A Theory of Family Communication

A General Model of Relational Schemas in Interpersonal Communication

Relational schema theory in interpersonal communication. One approach to communication that has led to tremendous advances in other areas of interpersonal communication and that promises to lead to a theory that meets the requirements outlined above is that of relationship schemas. Based on the assumption that people are at their core social beings (Fiske, 1991) and that therefore social cognition, particularly cognition about relationships, should be central to the creation and interpretation of interpersonal behavior, authors such as Fletcher (1993), Baldwin (1992) and Fiske (1991, 1992) have argued independently from one another for the centrality of relational schemas for our understanding of interpersonal behavior. Although these authors all propose somewhat different conceptualizations of relational knowledge, they all agree that relational schemas broadly consist of interrelated pieces of declarative and procedural knowledge about relationships that reside in long-term memory (Baldwin, 1992). Declarative knowledge refers to descriptive knowledge of the attributes and features of things, whereas procedural knowledge refers to a person's knowledge of if-then contingencies (Baldwin, 1992).

The composition of relational schemas. A very detailed and sophisticated model regarding the composition of relationship schemas was proposed by Baldwin (1992). According to Baldwin's model, relational schemas consist of three sub-sets of knowledge stored in memory, or sub-schemas. The first sub-set of knowledge (self-schema) is related to the self and corresponds roughly to what traditionally has been called the self-concept. It includes self-relevant thoughts, such as one's ideals and goals, one's emotions, and one's attitudes and beliefs. The second sub-set of knowledge (other-schema) concerns the other with whom one is in the relationship, that is, it consists of knowledge of the other. This knowledge includes perceptions of others and of their beliefs, attitudes, and expectations they have for one's own behavior. The third sub-set (interpersonal-scripts) consists of models of behavioral sequences that define prototypical relational interactions with the other. It includes declarative and procedural knowledge of typical

behavioral sequences that can be used to interpret social situations, to form expectations about behavior, and to plan behavior. In addition to the knowledge about behavioral sequences, interpersonal scripts also contain knowledge associated with the behavioral sequences, such as emotions and motivations (Baldwin, 1992).

Although these three sub-sets can be conceptualized in isolation from one another and most certainly have been described independently from one another in past research (e.g., Fiske & Taylor, 1991), Baldwin's (1992) main theoretical claim is that these three sub-schemas are so highly interdependent on one another (i.e., any change in one will effect changes in the others) that they actually all belong to the same cognitive structure: the relationship schema. Results of his research tend to support this claim. For example, in an ingenious set of studies, Baldwin and colleagues (Baldwin, Carrel, & Lopez, 1990) showed that individuals' self-concepts and their perceptions of their abilities and morality are influenced by subliminal cues showing approval or disapproval of others with whom they have a relevant relationship. Approval or disapproval of others had no influence on the evaluation of aspects of the self that are not relevant in the relationship.

Relevant in this case means a relationship in which the aspect of the self that is evaluated is important. For example, Baldwin et al. (1990) found that a student's relationship to a professor is relevant to the student's self-perceived intelligence, but not the student's self-perceived morality, whereas the reverse is true for a student's relationship with a religious figure. Baldwin et al. (1990) interpreted these results as indicating that the impact of reflected appraisals of others on the self-concept is mediated by the specific relationship that exist between self and other. In other words, the relationship between self-concept and other's appraisal is established in cognition by a relationship schema. Acitelli and Young (1996) also observed an interdependence between the self-concept and relational cognition, which they argued is responsible for gender differences in communication behavior and relationship outcomes such as satisfaction and stability.

Based on these findings, the first axiom of the general model of relational communication is:

A1: Relationship schemas contain declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge, and interpersonal scripts linking cognition about the self, other, and the relationship.

The hierarchical organization of relational schemas. Although Baldwin's (1992) model is intriguing and its core assumption is supported by data, one shortcoming of the model is that the boundaries of relationship schemas in their current conceptualization are very broad. If relationship schemas, as Baldwin proposed, include the self-concept, the other schema, and all applicable relational scripts, it's unclear what is not part of a relationship schema. The open boundaries of the relationship schema concept are mainly due to the inclusion of the self-concept and the interpersonal scripts in the relationship schema. Including the self-concept broadens the content of the relationship schema because of the centrality and of the self-concept in cognition and its interconnectedness with almost all other cognitive structures. Including relational scripts broaden the concept of relationship schemas because interpersonal scripts are usually based on repeated experiences across a number of relationships (Abelson, 1981). Consequently, interpersonal scripts include memories of interactions that took place in several relationships. The effect of including such scripts in a relationship schema means that it is essentially impossible to distinguish scripts based on different relationships. With such broadly defined borders, however, each relationship schema easily can be construed to incorporate most, if not all, of a person's social knowledge.

Concepts with overly broad or unclear boundaries as Baldwin's (1992) conceptualization of relationship schemas, however, lose their utility for theorists of interpersonal relationships, because they are difficult, if not impossible, to operationalize. As a consequence, it is very difficult to test hypotheses based on these concepts and to interpret the results of such tests. In other words, for relationship schemas to be theoretically and practically useful, they need to be more narrowly conceptualized and defined.

One theorist also dealing with relationship schemas who proposed a model with more narrowly defined relationship schemas is Fletcher (1993). (Fletcher & Thomas, 1996). Fletcher (1993) achieved narrower definitions because he conceptualized relationship schemas as existing at different levels of specificity, ranging from generalized knowledge that is true for all social relationships to the unique knowledge about only one, particular interpersonal relationship. Specifically, Fletcher's model includes relationship schemas at three hierarchical levels. On the most general level is knowledge that applies to all social relationships. Such general knowledge might include beliefs like the norm of reciprocity or pragmatic rules that apply to all interactions, regardless of whether the person is a stranger or one's best friend, a new acquaintance or an old nemesis.

On the second level are relationship type beliefs that include knowledge specific to the different types of relationships one is likely to have, such as romantic relationships, parental relationships, collegial relationships, and friendship relationships, to name a few. The knowledge stored in schemas on this level is more specific than the general relationship knowledge and, according to Fletcher (1993), therefore enables people to come to causal explanations of one's own and others' behaviors. While Fletcher's own research focuses on intimate relationships and on the exploration of close relationship schemas, he assumes that similar belief systems exist within cognition for other types of relationships as well.

Finally, on the most specific level are specific relationship schemas that apply to one particular relationship a person has with one specific other person. These schemas contain memories, attributions, and experiences made within the context of that particular relationship only and allow individuals to adapt their cognition, behaviors, and interpretations to that particular relationship. In other words, these particular relationship beliefs are what make each relationship unique and distinguishable from other relationships (Fletcher, 1993).

By proposing relational schemas as hierarchically structured, Fletcher's (1993) model accomplishes two things that are missing in Baldwin's (1992) model. First, as already suggested,

Fletcher's relational schemas are defined more narrowly than Baldwin's. This avoids the major problem already discussed that results from Baldwin's overly broad definition of relationship schemas. Secondly, by locating relational knowledge at three different levels of generality and applicability, Fletcher also proposes a model of how relational knowledge is stored in memory that is both economical and efficient and that explains how knowledge acquired in the context of one relationship can be applied to another relationship.

Fletcher's (1993) model is economical and efficient, because it suggests that rather than storing knowledge of similar experiences and similar beliefs in different places in memory for different relationships, they are stored in more general schemas that are available for information processing in different relationships. That is, experiences that are repeated in different relationships of the same type are stored in relationship type schemas, rather than in particular relationship schemas. Similarly, experiences that are repeated in relationships of different types are stored in the general social knowledge schema rather than any of the more relationship specific schemas. As a result, less overall memory capacity is devoted to relationship schemas in Fletcher's model than in Baldwin's (1992) model.

That experiences that are repeated in more than one relationship are stored in more general schemas also explains how knowledge from one specific relationship can be applied to other relationships. By being stored in more general schemas, such knowledge is available to information processing in other relationships as well. Of course, the exact processes that determine whether information is stored in general, relationship type, or relationship specific schemas is not completely understood yet, but it stands to reason that judgments about the uniqueness of the event will influence that process.

Based on Fletcher's (1993) findings regarding the hierarchical representation of romantic relationship schemas, the second axiom of the general model of relational communication is:

A2: Relational knowledge relevant to interpersonal relationships exists in cognition at three levels of specificity: at the level of general social schemas, at the level of the

relationship type schemas, and at the level of relationship specific schemas.

Developing relational schemas. Most cognitive scientists believe that cognitive schemas are the result of direct, personal experiences or communication about the experiences (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). In the case of relationship schemas, this involves either direct experiences in the relationships for which schemas develop, or communication about these relationships. For example, person can develop a schema for romantic relationships based on experiences in their own romantic relationships, by learning about romantic relationships from others (for example through observing others in romantic relationships, discussing such relationships with others, and through media representations of such relationships), or a combination of both.

During this process of schema development, the person's schema will become more complex, more abstract, and more tightly organized in memory (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). In the case of relationship schemas, this means that similar experiences that are made in all types of relationships become part of a general social schema. Experiences that are made only in relationships of the same type become part of relationship type schemas. And finally, experiences that are made only in one specific relationship become part of relationship specific schemas. The same process applies to relational knowledge gained through other means than direct experience. Social knowledge that applies to all relationships becomes part of the general social schema, knowledge that applies to all relationships of the same type becomes part of the relationship type schema, and knowledge that applies to only a specific relationship becomes part of the relationship specific schema.

The development of relationship schemas at three different levels of hierarchy suggests that there is little if any duplication of social knowledge in the different types of relationship schemas. It also suggests that the relationship type and general social knowledge schemas are less like to change in response to individual experiences than relationship specific schemas. Only experiences that are made consistently in all relationships of a given type will affect relationship type schemas, and only experiences made consistently in relationships of all types will affect the

general social schema. All unique experiences, however, will affect only the relationship specific schema. This could explain, for example, why racial stereotypes persist even in light of positive experiences with individual members of a different race. They simply affect only the relationship specific schema, but not the relationship type schema.

Based on the observations regarding the development of relationship schemas at different levels of hierarchy, the third axiom of the general model of relational communication is:

A3: More abstract relationship schemas are less likely to change in response to concrete relationship experiences than more concrete relationship schemas.

Within the context of Fletcher's (1993) hierarchical mode, that means that relationship specific schemas are most likely to change as a result of unique experiences. Relationship type schemas and the general social schema, however, are much more stable and change only after consistent experiences in all relationships of a given type for relationship type schemas or after consistent experiences in all relationships, for the general social schema.

Accessing relational knowledge from memory. Because different and potentially even conflicting relational knowledge exists at three different levels of hierarchy in social cognition, there must be a process that determines how information is retrieved. We suggest that people will always first access their relationship specific schemas for relevant information. If the information is not available in that schema, people will next access the relationship types schema. If the relevant information is also not available in the relationship type schema, persons will finally access the general social schema. This is the same process that Pinker (1999) has shown to operate for the retrieval of verb forms, which depends on the memory of specific irregular verbs and on the memory for rules of forming regular verbs.

According to Pinker (1999), when people form verb tenses, they first try to access irregular forms of the specific verb from memory. Only when no irregular forms for that verb are retrieved from memory (either because the verb is regular or the person has not been exposed sufficiently to the irregular form to commit the irregular form to memory), the person will produce the verb

form based on grammatical rules stored in more general schemas. The parallels to relational schemas are immediately apparent. If specific knowledge regarding the particular relationship exists in memory, it is retrieved first. If it does not, a person will access more generally applicable knowledge that is stored in relationship type or general social schemas.

Based on our understanding of how information that is stored in different schemas is accessed, the fourth and fifth axioms of the general model of relational communication are:

A4: In utilizing social knowledge stored in different schemas, persons will always access specific relationship schemas first, relationship type schemas second, and the general social schema third.

A5: Relevant social knowledge stored at the level of a more specific relationship schema supercedes the knowledge stored in higher-order relationship schemas.

The influence of relational schemas on interpersonal behavior. Consistent with other cognitive schemas (Fiske & Taylor, 1991), relational schemas are expected to influence interpersonal communicative behaviors through their influence on information processing, both controlled and automatic (Fletcher & Thomas, 1996). That is, relational schemas are expected to influence persons' encoding and decoding of information, the inferences and evaluations they make, how they memorize social events, their information seeking behavior, and ultimately their interpersonal behaviors. Recent research provides ample evidence for the validity of these assumptions.

In support of the idea that relationship schemas contain both self and other relevant information, Aron and Aron (1996) found that in intimate relationships, partners encode and decode information about their partners as information about themselves, and vice versa. Consequently, when asked to evaluate things, they as often use their partner's preferences as their own (and vice versa). This showed not only that information of self and other are stored in the same cognitive schema, but that such information is equally accessible for information processing and liable to bias decision making.

In regard to inferences and evaluations, Murray, Holmes, MacDonald and Ellsworth (1996) reported that persons' evaluations of themselves, their perception of their partners' regard, and their evaluations of their relationships are interdependent and that persons adjust them in a fashion that is self-enhancing. Similarly indicative of relationship schemas' influence on drawing inferences, Murray and Holmes (1996) found that persons in currently satisfying relationships have positively biased (idealized) perceptions of their partners and partners' behaviors. In a related vein, Holmberg and Veroff (1996) found that memories that persons have of their partners and relationships are variable and influenced by the current state of their relationships.

Research by Vorauer and Ross (1996) has shown that the current state of a relationship influences the informational goals partners have in regard to each other and the relationship and also affects their information seeking behavior. Finally, Fletcher and Thomas (1996) presented data showing that relationship schemas directly affect behaviors. Specifically, they found that temporary judgments of the relationship influence verbal behavior, whereas global judgments of the relationship influence nonverbal behaviors. Thus, there is strong evidence that mental representations of relationships have a significant influence on persons' automatic and controlled cognitive processes and their behavior.

Based on our understanding of how relational schemas influence cognitive processes and behaviors, the last axiom of the general model of relational communication is:

A6: Relational schemas affect relational communication through their influence on automatic and controlled cognitive processes.

A Theory of Family Relationship Schemas and Communication

The theoretical model (see Table 1) that we have laid out in the preceding part of our manuscript is a general model that applies to the mental representation of all interpersonal relationships. In this part of our manuscript, we focus on one specific type of relationship only and show how the general model outlined above can be used to arrive at a theory of family communication. Because everybody has them and because they play a crucial role in each

person's socialization, family relationships are among the most important interpersonal relationships we have in our lives. It is therefore particularly useful to use the insights gained from the general model for the development of a theory of family communication. In developing the theory, we will make use of the axioms that specify the general model and of research on the content of relationship schemas and family communication patterns.

Defining family relationship schemas. The discussion of the general model should have made it obvious that a theory of family communication that is based on a schematic representation of relational knowledge must be situated at the level of relationship types schemas. Specifically, we propose that persons have a relationship type schema for family relationships. Based on Axiom 2 of the general model, which specifies the three different levels of hierarchy for relationship schemas, we propose that the knowledge that is part of the family relationship schema is so specific that it applies only to family relationships and not to other types of relationships, which would make it part of a more general social schema. At the same time, this knowledge is broad enough to apply to all family members. That is, it does not include knowledge that is so specific as to apply to only one family member, which is part of the relationship specific schema for that particular person.

Consistent with Axiom 1 of the general model, which specifies the content of relationship schemas, we claim that family relationship schemas contain declarative and procedural knowledge, as well as interpersonal scripts. Consistent with Axioms 4 & 5, which specifies the way the different schemas are accessed from memory, we argue that when accessing relational knowledge, persons will always first access their relationship specific schemas before accessing relationship type schemas. That is, knowledge that is part of the family relationship schema comes into play in situations where family members have no relevant information in their relationship specific schema. Similarly, only when there is also no relevant information in the family relationship schema will persons access their general social schema (see Figure 2).

For example, growing up in a very outspoken family, Sue has developed the belief that family members should be outspoken with one another as part of her family relationship schema. At the same time, Sue has experienced her brother Tom to be easily offended by comments on his appearance. Thus, the belief that Tom will be offended by remarks about his appearance has become part of her relationship specific schema for her relationship with Tom. In situations where Sue is asked to comment on a family member's clothing, she will access her relationship specific schemas first and her family relationship schema second. Because the relationship specific schemas for the other family members contain no relevant information, her family relationship schema will determine her response for these family members, and she will be blunt. Her response to Tom, however, is determined by her relationship specific schema, and will be more guarded.

As can be seen from this example, the knowledge that is part of the family relationship schema does not necessarily have to apply to all relationships a person has with family members. Nonetheless, it should be the default for the relationships a person has with family members and based both on experiences made with family members and on cultural norms acquired through socialization. Thus, family relationship schemas contain knowledge that is both experiential and prescriptive, and that is central to the all relationships with family members.

The content of family relationship schemas. Family relationship schemas contain knowledge that applies to all familial relationships of a person. To get a better understanding of what kinds of beliefs constitute this knowledge, it is helpful to look at the beliefs that Fletcher (1993; Fletcher & Thomas, 1996) identified to be contained in close relationship schemas. Based on a factor analysis of the reports of participants involved in romantic relationships, Fletcher found that most close relationship type beliefs fall into four factors: intimacy, including trust, respect, love, and affection; passion, including sex and vitality; individuality, including independence and equity; and external factors, including personal security and children.

Although most beliefs regarding close relationships fall into these four factors, it is important to note that this does not mean that most people have the same beliefs in these areas or that they hold them similarly strongly (Fletcher & Thomas, 1996). Rather, there is considerable variance between individuals as to the beliefs they hold and how strongly they hold them. For example, some persons strongly believe that passion is at the foundation of a close romantic relationship, whereas others consider passion only secondary to their relationship. Similarly, whereas some persons believe that how well their respective families get along is crucial for the happiness of their relationship, others do not believe that how well their families get along has impact on their relationship satisfaction. What is similar for all persons, however, is that they all have a schema for romantic relationships that contain beliefs about their relationships' intimacy, individuality, passion, and external factors.

Because of the similarity between romantic and familial relationships, we would expect that family relationship schemas also contain beliefs relevant to intimacy, individuality, and external factors. Passion, however, is less central to family relationships and we therefore expect it not to be part of the family relationship schema, although families do vary in the extent to which they express their affection with one another, both verbally and physically. It is unlikely, however, that the four factors of intimacy, individuality, affection, and external factors include all relevant beliefs about families that make up family relationship schemas. Based on our previous research that has shown their importance for family communication and functioning, we expect beliefs regarding the role of communication in families to be part of family schemas, especially beliefs regarding conversation orientation and conformity orientation in families.

Family communication patterns. Based on research by McLeod and Chaffee (1972), Fitzpatrick and Ritchie (1994; Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990) have conceptualized conversation and conformity orientations in families as central beliefs that determine much of how families communicate. Recent research has demonstrated the centrality of conversation and conformity orientation on various outcomes for families, such as conflict and conflict resolution (Koerner &

Fitzpatrick, 1997a), children's resiliency to adverse environmental influences (Fitzpatrick & Koerner, 1997), children's future romantic relationships (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997b), utilization of social self-restraint and social withdrawal behaviors (Fitzpatrick, Marshall, Leutwiler & Krcmer, 1996), the enactment of family rituals (Baxter & Clark, 1996), and effect of parent's work environments on the family context (Ritchie, 1997).

The first belief, conversation orientation, is defined as the degree to which families create a climate where all family members are encouraged to participate in unrestrained interaction about a wide array of topics. In families on the high end of this dimension, family members freely, frequently, and spontaneously interact with each other without many limitations in regard to time spent in interaction and topics discussed. These families spend a lot of time interacting with each other and family members share their individual activities, thoughts, and feelings with family members. In these families, actions or activities that the family plans to engage in as a unit are discussed within the family, as are family decisions. Conversely, in families at the low end of the conversation orientation dimension, family members interact less frequently with each other and there are only few topics that are openly discussed with all family members. There is less exchange of private thoughts, feelings, and activities. In these families, activities that families engage in as a unit are not usually discussed in great detail, nor is everybody's input sought after for family decisions.

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

The other important belief regarding family communication is conformity orientation. Conformity orientation refers to the degree to which family communication stresses a climate of homogeneity of attitudes, values, and beliefs. Families on the high end of this dimension are characterized by interactions that emphasize a uniformity of beliefs and attitudes. Their interactions typically focusing on harmony, conflict avoidance, and the interdependence of family members. In inter-generational exchanges, communication in these families reflects obedience to parents and other adults. Families on the low end of the conformity orientation dimension are characterized by interactions that focus on heterogeneous attitudes and beliefs, as well as on the individuality of family members and their independence from their families. In inter-generational exchanges, communication reflects the equality of all family members, e.g., children are usually involved in decision making.

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

The effects that these two core beliefs about communication in families have on actual family communication are often dependent on each other. That is, rather than having main effects on family communication, these two beliefs often interact with one another. Therefore, to predict how one belief impacts family communication, it is not sufficient to know only that belief, but necessary to also know the other belief as well. For example, to predict the communication patterns of a family, it is not enough to know that this family is high in conformity orientation because the exact effect this has on family communication depends on that family's conversation orientation, and vice versa (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997b). In other words, in addition to having direct effects on family communication, the two dimensions of conformity and conversation orientation also interact with one another to create four family types that differ from each other in qualitative ways. To distinguish, them, is therefore of theoretical significance and not just a convenient way of describing four family types that are created by crossing these two dimensions.

The final model. Based on the general model of the role of relationships schemas for interpersonal communication and on the research describing the content of familial relationship schemas, we present our theory of family communication. We propose that family communication behavior is largely the result of cognitive processes that are determined by family relationship schemas. Family relationship schemas are relationship type schemas described in the general model. That is, they are part of a hierarchical organization of relational knowledge that is used by individuals to process information relevant to their relationships and interpersonal behavior (see Figure 1). The information contained in a family relationship schema is based on direct experiences within the family and on other socializing factors and applies to all relationships a person has with family members. It is accessed whenever there is no relevant information contained in the relationship specific schema for a given information processing problem (see Figure 2). Beliefs contained in the family relationship schema include beliefs about intimacy, individuality, affection, external factors, conversation orientation, and conformity orientation.

Family Relationship Schemas and Intersubjectivity and Interactivity.

Our theory of family communication is based on the more general theory of relational schemas we outlined earlier. As such, it is a cognitive model of family communication that does not address intersubjectivity nor interactivity explicitly. We argued earlier, however, that a theory of family communication must address these two issues to be complete. Essentially, we contend that the model of family relationship schemas addresses the issues of intersubjectivity and interactivity implicitly by locating most of the knowledge relevant to communicating within a family at the level of relationship type schemas.

Family relationship schemas imply intersubjectivity. Because relationship type schemas are formed based on repeated experiences in the same type of relationship (Axiom 3), family relationship schemas are based on repeated experiences with family members, many of which are formed not in dyadic interactions, but in interactions involving most or all of the family. As a result, the experiential bases of the family relationship schemas for all family members are very similar, if not identical. In addition, much of the other socializing influences that determine family relationship schemas are shared as well. Whether that be media descriptions of family that are consumed together, family lore that is shared, or family traditions that are discussed, families experience many of the socializing factors together. In sum, because family members share the experiential base and the socializing factors that determine their family relationship schemas, they have intersubjectivity.

In regard to developing family relationship schemas, however, family members are not just passive receptors of socializing influences (Reiss, 1981). To the contrary, family members are actively engaged in defining themselves and in communicating about their relationship to one another and their interactions. In fact, one could argue that defining themselves as a family and the relationships with one another is a hallmark of family communication. Parents consistently educate children about how to behave in the context of family and provide important feedback to the children of how others react to them and their behavior. Conversely, children react to their

parents' behavior, question their instructions, and point out inconsistency between the parents' rules and their own behavior, as well as inconsistencies in parents' treatment of their children. These interactions not only allow children to develop the ability for self-regulation, but also force parents and children to explicitly acknowledge, discuss, and renegotiate the rules and norms that govern their interactions and relationships that for most other social relationships remain largely implicit. In sum, family relationship schemas are clearly the outcomes of family interactivity.

Conclusion

In this manuscript, we have developed a model of family communication that is based on a general theory of relational schemas that emerged from recent advances in the field of cognitive social psychology. As communication scholars, we have paid special attention to making apparent the connections between relational schemas and communication behaviors, both in regard to the dependence of relational schemas on communicative behaviors and in regard to the dependence of communicative behaviors on relational schemas. As with all cognitive representations of external phenomena, there is an obvious interdependence between the two. How we perceive familial relationships and how we behave in them depends on our family relationship schemas, and our family relationship schemas depend on our interactions within the family.

By locating family relationship schemas at the level of relationship type schemas, the model accounts for both intersubjectivity and interactivity in family communication. In addition, the model also accounts for the stability of family relevant cognition and their flexibility in light of consistent experiences that are inconsistent with the existing schema. Further, by specifying relationship specific schemas that exist for individual family members, the model also explains how families account for idiosyncrasies in the behavior of individual family members without changing their schema for the whole family.

Of course, the validity of our theoretical model thus far has not been established. Although there are a lot of data, only some of which we reviewed in this manuscript, that seems

to support the model, the model thus far has not been explicitly tested in an empirical investigation. To do that is the obvious next step in our research on family communication. It is our hope, however, that this theoretical discussion has provided the reader with an example of how communication scholars approach the task of theory building and how empirical findings from fields that pay little, if any, attention to communication can be used to arrive at theoretical explanations of behavior that are both richer, and more valid, than models that exclude a consideration of communication.

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Table 1.

The Six Axioms of the General Model of Relationship Schemas in Communication.

- A1: Relationship schemas contain declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge, and interpersonal scripts linking cognition about the self, other, and the relationship.
- A2: Relational knowledge relevant to interpersonal relationships exists in cognition at three levels of specificity: at the level of general social schemas, at the level of the relationship type schemas, and at the level of relationship specific schemas.
- A3: More abstract relationship schemas are less likely to change in response to concrete relationship experiences than more concrete relationship schemas.
- A4: In utilizing social knowledge stored in different schemas, persons will always access specific relationship schemas first, relationship type schemas second, and the general social schema third.
- A5: Relevant social knowledge stored at the level of a more specific relationship schema supercedes the knowledge stored in higher-order relationship schemas.
- A6: Relational schemas affect relational communication through their influence on automatic and controlled cognitive processes.
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Figure 1.

The hierarchical organization of a person’s social knowledge in regard to three different types of relationships.

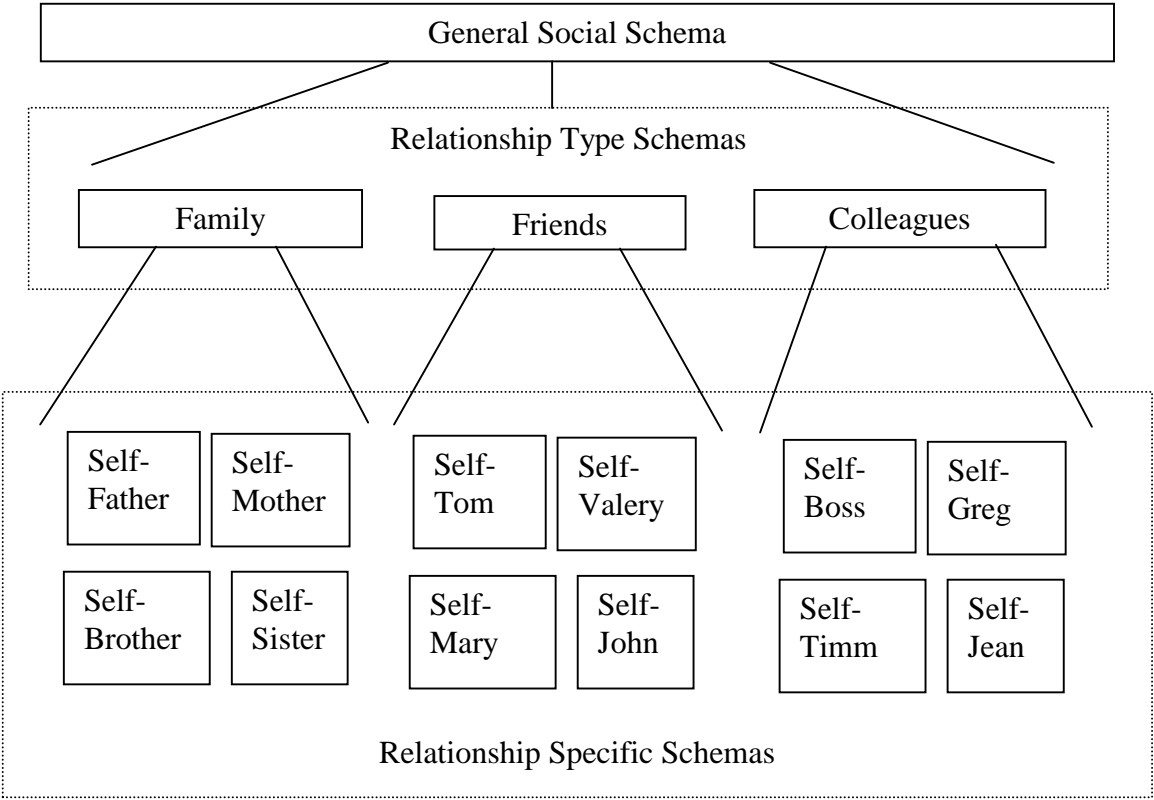


Figure 2.

The process of accessing relational knowledge in the interpretation of a message.

