

Running Head: FAMILY COMMUNICATION SCHEMATA

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Effects on Children's Resiliency

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It is a pleasure for us to be included in this volume in honor of Jack McLeod who has been a friend and colleague at the University of Wisconsin since the first author joined the faculty in 1978. We were not members of the same department but became friends during Mary Anne's first few years on the faculty. Jack is the consummate teacher. With his low-key yet Socratic manner, he was an invaluable mentor for Mary Anne during her years as a young faculty member. Committed to equality, Jack served as a resource for all kinds of students and faculty and helped them to develop resiliency to the stresses of academic life. But when it comes to his relationships, Jack went far beyond equality and was tireless in lending an ear and giving help, support and guidance. His insights not only about research on communication but also on the practices, norms, and values of serving as a professor in a major American research university have had a major influence on the scope and direction of our careers as well as many other academics in this country and abroad.

Jack's research has also had a profound influence on our thinking about family communication. In this chapter, we take the reader through a discussion of family communication patterns and show how this work has been adapted to the study of interpersonal processes in marriages and families. Then, we go beyond the typologies and show that the concepts within these perspectives give us a better picture of how children and families can become resilient to the stresses of daily life. As we will see, just as Jack in his openness and warmth helped to make young people resilient in academic life, so too, the creation of certain types of family environments helps children to survive adverse conditions.

#### Family Communication Schemata

Family members have internal working models of family communication and relationships. These internal models, or family communication schemata, are knowledge structures that represent the external world of the family and provide a basis for interpreting

what other family members say and do (Burrell & Fitzpatrick, 1990; Fitzpatrick, 1990; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a). Individuals in the family encode and process messages from family members and about the family in terms of these schemata. How can we tap into various family communication schemata?

To isolate the dimensions that would help us to tap subgroups of individuals who hold various family communication schemata, we turned to two bodies of research on family communication. The first is the work of Fitzpatrick and her colleagues on marital schemata (Fitzpatrick, 1990) and the second is the work of Ritchie (1991) on parent-child communication. Ritchie (1991) based his work on the original family communication patterns work of McLeod and Chaffee (1972). The McLeod and Chaffee (1972) paper spawned a veritable cottage industry of research relating family types to media usage. But as we will demonstrate, the work had a major influence on the study in interpersonal processes in the family.

There are significant theoretical linkages between these two bodies of research. Fitzpatrick's Relational Dimensions Inventory (RDI) provides one way to tap couples' marital schemata, and Ritchie's Revised Family Communication Pattern instrument (RFCP) provides one way to tap family members' parent-child schemata (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990). Although these are distinct relationships within the family, they are not independent. Marital communication and parent-child communication mutually influence one another and often occur in the same context. We argue that marital and parent-child communication expresses a common set of underlying ideas about the family. Together this work forms the basis for family communication schemata.

### *Marital Communication*

Much of the research with Fitzpatrick's (1976) couple types has focused on the actual communicative exchanges between spouses. Of particular interest has been how couples in the

various types handle conflict (Burgraff & Sillars, 1986; Fitzpatrick, Fallis & Vance, 1982; Sillars, Pike, Jones & Redman, 1983), deal with compliance messages (Witteman & Fitzpatrick, 1986), display power and control (Best, 1979; Williamson & Fitzpatrick, 1985), have casual discussions (Fitzpatrick, Vance & Witteman, 1984), and discuss themes that define marriage (Sillars, Weisberg, Burgraff, & Wilson, 1987).

Couple types formed from Fitzpatrick's (1976) RDI have predicted a variety of communication behaviors, sequences, and emotional outcomes for individual spouses as well as the marriage as a unit. This empirical typology for characterizing the communication schemata of married couples (for a comprehensive discussion of the typology's development and validation, see Fitzpatrick, 1988) involves (a) identifying significant conceptual areas in marital and family life, (b) developing the measurement that delineated aspects of marital and family life, and (c) comparing spouses' response to the dimensions to determine couple types. The 77-item RDI questionnaire probes each spouse's views about marriage along three conceptual dimensions: Interdependence (e.g., Sharing), Ideology (e.g., Traditionalism), and Communication (e.g., Conflict Avoidance).

Cluster-analysis of individual responses to the full (77-item) questionnaire identifies three basic marital types for each spouse: Traditional (high on traditionalism and sharing, low on conflict avoidance). Independent (low on traditionalism and conflict avoidance, high on sharing), and Separate (high on traditionalism and conflict avoidance, low on sharing).

Both Traditionals and Independents emphasize sharing and engagement; however, the Traditional places more emphasis on conventional values including traditional sex roles. Traditional men communicate their feelings only to their wives. The Independent places more emphasis on spontaneity and individual autonomy. Conflict is handled through a combination of direct demands, inquiries about the needs, wishes of the spouse, and negotiation. Separates

avoid open expressions of feelings and opinions, perceive themselves in very traditional sex roles, and avoid conflict. When conflict does arise for Separates, they are rarely able to coordinate an effective reaction (Fitzpatrick, 1976, 1977, 1981, 1983, 1984, 1988).

In about two thirds of all couples, partners agree about their marital type (“pure type” couples); the remaining one third are classified as “mixed type” couples. These mixed-type couples are in no sense a residual category. The various combinations (e.g., Separate husband/Traditional wife) represent very different family systems with different patterns of communication and different outcomes than either a marriage of two Separates or two Traditionals.

The Traditional, Independent, and Separate orientation to marriage may be thought of as representing evidence of underlying marital schemata (Burrell & Fitzpatrick, 1990; Fitzpatrick, 1990). More specifically, dimensions of the marital schemata guide each partner’s interpretation, attentiveness, and responses to both the verbal and nonverbal behavior of the other, thereby having a cumulative effect on communicative behavior (Fitzpatrick, 1991). Additionally, studies of unmarried subjects using both media content (Hawkins, Pingree, Fitzpatrick, Thompson & Bauman, 1991) and interaction sequences (Fitzpatrick, Allen & Burrell, 1993; Giles & Fitzpatrick, 1984) provide evidence that marital schemata can also serve as a basis for interpreting the interactions of other couples.

#### *Parent-Child Communication*

As with marital communication, individual perceptions of parent-child communication can be regarded as indicators of underlying schemata (Meadowcroft & Fitzpatrick, 1988). More specifically, family communication patterns serve as internal working models of family communication. Children actively learn how to interpret their family members’ verbal and

nonverbal behavior as well as the behavior of other families based on their schemata of family communication.

McLeod and Chaffee's (1972) Family Communication Patterns (FCP) instrument was devised to explore perceptions of family norms. The two dimensions identified by the FCP instrument were originally labeled socio-orientation and concept-orientation; socio-orientation was interpreted as a preference for harmonious social relationships over ideas, and concept-orientation was interpreted as a preference for ideas over relationships (McLeod & Chaffee, 1972). Noting a series of research findings inconsistent with this framework, Ritchie (1988) reinterpreted these dimensions as measures of conformity orientation and conversation orientation, respectively. This reinterpretation was empirically validated by Ritchie (1991).

Although the dimensional results are interesting, conformity and conversation orientation can be used to classify family types. McLeod and Chaffee (1972) derived four Family types by dividing their sample along the median on both scales. The characteristics of these family types are given in Table 1.

-----Insert Table 1 about here-----

Pluralistic families, high on conversation orientation and low on conformity orientation, perceive open communication and emotional supportiveness in the family. Protective families, low on conversation orientation and high on conformity orientation, see their families as emphasizing obedience and conformity and as avoiding open conflict through overt compliance to parental authority. Consensual families, high on both conversation and conformity orientation, perceive their family as expressing strong pressures toward agreement even as they encourage children to take an interest in ideas and to express their feelings. Finally, Laissez-

Faire families low on both RFCP dimensions, perceive their families as characterized by little parent-child interaction, leaving the child more susceptible to the influence of external social settings.

### A Conceptual Merger

In this section, we discuss the conceptual similarity between Fitzpatrick's marital typology and McLeod and Chaffee's family typology. The empirical relationships between the dimensions of each perspective as well as the family and marital types was documented by Fitzpatrick and Ritchie (1994). In considering both of these perspectives, we have a measurement tool that isolates subgroups of families that hold different schemata of family communication and whose parents hold different schemas of marital communication as well (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1993).

#### *Marital and Family Types*

Both McLeod and Chaffee (1972) and Fitzpatrick (1977) originally chose their dimensions of marital and family life, respectively, so as to build typologies. McLeod and Chaffee (1972) employed a classical model of typological construction in which they separated two variables into high and low categories, hence creating a fourfold table. Fitzpatrick (1977) employed a polythetic classification scheme in which three distinct types emerged from how samples of couples responded to the three dimensions of interest. Marital and familial relationships are not only arguable the two most important types of interpersonal relationships that humans have, they are also very similar in terms of temporal stability, commitment, and intimacy, to name only a few of the most important characteristics they share. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that both relationships are based on similar beliefs and values, that is, that there is a strong relationship among couple types and family types.

Typologies are important to many theorists, clinicians, and researchers, because they highlight important associations and interactions between variables. Baumrind (1966), for example, in her seminal typology of parenting styles, characterized one type of family as an “authoritative one” in which parents were able to balance high nurturance with high control and clear communication about what was required of the child. This style can be contrasted to the “authoritarian style” where the assertion of parental power was the primary factor distinguishing this type of family. If she had only been interested in the exercise of power within the family and ignored warmth and nurturing, Baumrind (1966) would have missed a crucial distinction between those parents who exhibit controlling behaviors in a warm and nurturing manner versus those who do so in a less supportive way. As her research showed, these family types relate to very different outcomes for children. Similarly, couples with traditional ideas about male and female behavior and very high levels of sharing and expressiveness have established a very different marital system from one with the same level of traditionalism yet very little sharing or expressivity. Families who stress conformity in an open atmosphere are markedly different from families who demand conformity without warmth or openness.

#### *Relationships between RDI and RFCP Dimensions*

The patterns governing communication in both marital and parent-child subsystems can be explained through a conceptual analysis of both RDI and RFCP dimensions (Fitzpatrick, 1990; Ritchie, 1988). Theoretically related, these instruments provide invaluable information about the distinct attitudes within the family system and the communication patterns that result. More specifically, both the RDI and RFCP instruments tap into families’ mental representations of interpersonal relationships, communication, and social structure.

The theoretical melding of both the RDI and RFCP approach enables researchers to explore and explain similarities and dissimilarities in personal and social conceptualizations of

the family. For example, the RDI instrument probes marital attitudes and expectations about emotional and social communication. This particular knowledge of marital schemata lays a firm foundation for understanding the parent-child positions within the family hierarchy. To further explore this area of family communication norms and role expectations, the RFCP provides important information about perceptions of conformity and conversation expectations within the family.

Our merger uncovers two primary theoretical dimensions accessed by both RDI and RFCP instruments. We call the first major conceptual dimension underlying both the RDI and RFCP *openness and emotional accessibility*. Many writers have argued that the major function left to the postmodern family is the care and nurturance of family members, which is accomplished through verbal and nonverbal communication (Fitzpatrick & Badzinski, 1985). Emotional climate is a central discriminator of numerous family and child outcomes (e.g., Gottman & Levenson, 1988).

Across both the RDI and RFCP instruments, emotional accessibility and openness is measured by three primary scales: Sharing and Conflict Acceptance (calculated by reverse coding of the Conflict Avoidance scale) of the RDI and Conversation Orientation of the RFCP. These three scales imply openness in deployment of emotional resources, receptivity to new information, and shared responsibility for coping with daily emotional and social crises. The emotional and social influences on family members interact to form coherent schemata of family communication, which is evident in a consistent pattern of association between responses to the RFCP and RDI instruments. The RDI dimension of Sharing and the RFCP dimension of Conversation Orientation both refer to a free and open exchange of information, ideas, and feelings. Couples who value openness in their marriage are more likely to also value openness

in the parent-child relationship. Furthermore, openness to a free exchange of emotions and ideas requires a willingness to accept conflict.

The second major dimension underlying the RDI and the RFCP is *structural traditionalism*. The RDI dimension of Traditionalism and the RFCP dimension of Conformity Orientation both imply a respectful attitude toward authority and social customs as well as the authority of the parents with respect to the children. Classic studies of the behaviors of mothers with their children, for example, isolate the dimension of control-autonomy. Maternal behavior along this continuum varies from totally controlling the child's behavior to allowing the child complete autonomy (e.g., Schaefer, 1959).

Structural Traditionalism is the extent to which families adhere to well-defined role expectations. Because the family norms and roles are influenced by society, the two scales of Traditionalism and Conformity Orientation focus primarily on family roles legitimated from authoritative sources outside the family. In other words, these scales tap into each family member's perception of the role expectations of outside reference group members, such as society at large or specific sub-cultures.

The two basic dimensions of openness and emotional accessibility, on the one hand, and structural traditionalism, on the other hand, not only define the underlying structure of both the marital and the family typologies, they do so simultaneously, at least for the parents. In other words, families headed by couples that have a commitment to a traditional marital ideology perceive significantly more conformity orientation in family interactions than families headed by parents who do not have this commitment. Families headed by parents that have a commitment to sharing and the acceptance of conflict perceive significantly more of a conversation orientation in family interactions.

In other words, marital types are predictive of family types. That is, Traditional couples have families defined as Consensual by family members. These couples value openness in their exchanges but stress conformity to well-defined societal expectations. Independent couples have Pluralistic families because although they value openness they do not value conformity. Separate couples have Protective families because they value conformity and devalue openness. Mixed couple types who disagree on various dimensions of marital life head Laissez-Faire families.

### *Family Communication Schemas*

The close association of marriage and family types suggests to us not only that they are based on the same two underlying dimensions, but also that they are really two manifestations of the same underlying mental structures: namely family communication schemas. Specifically, we argue that family members have internal working models of family and family communication and the interpersonal relationships contained therein. These schemas are knowledge structures that represent the internal world of the family, based on openness and emotional accessibility, on the one hand, and structural traditionalism, on the other hand. Each schema has its own set of beliefs, attitudes and philosophies about family life and family relationships, and each is characterized by very specific communication behaviors. Thus, family communication schemas are central to family functioning because they affect attention and perception, memory for messages, inferences communicators draw from behaviors, and psychosocial outcomes of family members (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994).

Families with a Traditional-Consensual schema encourage children to discuss issues and express opinions, although they are expected to agree ultimately with the parents. While the climate in these families is lively, warm and interesting, the hierarchy in the family remains largely unchallenged. Families with an Independent-Pluralistic schema emphasize

communication and the expression of ideas and opinions but place little pressure on children to conform to parental viewpoints. Children in these families are encouraged to develop their own interests, to express needs and desires openly, and to strive to attain personal goals. Families with a Separate-Protective schema place a strong emphasis on child conformity but downplay interaction, maintaining an appearance of family peace and harmony by prohibiting dissent. Families with an Independent/Separate or Laissez-fair schema similarly downplay interaction and exert little pressure on children to conform. Parents and children in these families tend to pursue individual goals with little concern as to the need and desires of other family members, fostering individuality and personal freedom by accident rather than through open and affirming interaction.

These various family communication schemata differentially affect outcomes for all family members, and in particular for children. McLeod and Chaffee (1972) were initially interested in the impact of family communication patterns on children's responses to persuasive media messages. Since then, researchers have investigated the impact of family communication patterns, or the underlying family communication schemas as we have argued, in various other contexts. One such context is a child's resiliency or sound adaptation to life stresses, which we will discuss in the subsequent section.

#### Communication Processes and Resiliency

There has long been a concern in family studies and clinical psychology with developing an understanding of the factors that predict the development of various emotional disorders and psychopathology in both children and adults. Regardless of the stresses and assaults on children, however, there is a growing recognition that some children manage to emerge from difficult life circumstances relatively unscathed. Although adverse life experiences can leave lasting injury, some children do well in spite of them because some children can stand up to substantial stress.

And, some even thrive. This new line of work stresses *resiliency*, or the ability to handle stress, rather than dysfunction (Garmezy, 1991). As we will see, a complex web of factors can make children resilient.

On the basis of an analysis of previous research, Fitzpatrick and Koerner (1996) identified four clusters of factors related to child resiliency: 1) attributes of the child, such as an easygoing temperament (Wertlieb, Weigel, Springer & Felstein, 1989); 2) various skills and values possessed by the child, such as social competence (Luther, 1991); 3) caregiving by the parents and a good parent-child relationship (Gribble, Cowen, Wyman, Work, Wanon, & Raoff, 1993); and 4) social support (Garmezy, 1991).

For our purposes, we are interested in how communication practices and family communication environments may be related to the development of resiliency in children and adults. Clearly, not all of the factors related to resiliency are communication factors. For example, Radke-Yarrow and Brown (1993) found that a child's intelligence was positively related to resiliency, and communication is neither a distal or proximate cause of intelligence in children. Communication processes are, however, clearly implicated in social skills and competence, in parent-child relationships, and in social support (Burelson, Delia & Applegate, 1995).

Indeed, those factors most related to interaction in the family may be either a protective or resource factor (or both) although communication research is in short supply on these points. Conrad and Hammer (1993), for example, found that a child's social competence both protected the child from experiencing stress (i.e., protective factor) and gave the child a resource to draw upon when under stress (i.e. resource factor). Good parenting, defined as including both structure and warmth, was found to be a resource for children experiencing stress by Gest and Associates (Gest, Neeman, Hubbard, Masten, & Telleg, 1993).

Specifically, within our paradigm, family communication schemata have been linked to social competence in children, to aspects of caregiving in the family, to the kinds of social support children and parents receive, and to conflict management skills. The outcomes related to resiliency in children are linked to the functional communication skills fostered in the family of origin.

### *Social Competence*

In recent years, ample evidence has accumulated consistent with the contention that children who are unable to establish and maintain peer relationships are at risk for a range of negative outcomes both as children and as adults. Peer rejection has been cited as the single most reliable early indicator of subsequent contact with a psychiatric facility (Cowan, Pederson, Babigian, Izzo, & Troost, 1973), and children who have problems interacting with peers have been shown to be at risk for poor school adjustment, greater-than average rates of school dropout, juvenile delinquency, and referral for mental health problems (Cox & Gunn, 1980; Parker & Asher, 1987; Patterson, 1986; Roff, Sells, & Golden, 1972; Simons, Whitbeck, Conger, & Conger, 1991).

The factors that contribute to peer rejection have also received considerable study. Research has established that children who engage in aggressive or disruptive behavior tend to be singled out for peer rejection (Coie & Dodge, 1988; Coie & Kupersmidt, 1983; Dodge, 1983), as do children who possess social skills deficits (Putallaz & Gottman, 1981). Furthermore, the behavioral patterns associated with peer rejection differ for boys and girls. Whereas rejected boys tend to be aggressive, impulsive, disruptive, and uncooperative, rejected girls tend to be socially withdrawn, anxious, and less successful academically, but not more aggressive than their nonrejected counterparts (French, 1990; Strassberg, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1992).

These same studies have also shown that peer rejection frequently is the result of failure to conform to prevailing gender expectations. In the case of rejected boys, expectations for traditional masculine assertiveness are exceeded. Rejected girls, in contrast, fall short of gender expectations regarding feminine expressivity. The role that family plays in children's sex-role acquisition has been demonstrated by Rubin and Mills (1992). Their research has shown that parents have age and gender-related expectations for the acquisition of social skills related to managing aggression and decreasing social withdrawal.

Family communication schemata impact a child's social competence in at least three ways. First, different family types model different interaction strategies that the child is exposed to and may internalize. Second, family types differ in the expectations they hold for appropriate behavior and their willingness to enforce these expectations. Third, these family types differ in their concern for the child's integration with peers and the intervention strategies they may or may not engage in to improve the children's chance for success.

Fitzpatrick and her colleagues (Fitzpatrick, Marshall, Leutwiler, & Kremer, 1996) investigated this relationship between family type and children's social competence. They interviewed middle school children (grades 1, 4, and 6) about typical patterns of family interaction, using talking picture books. The books involved a variety of different family conversations, and children noted which styles were similar to those employed in their families. Later, teachers completed behavioral assessment of the target child's social behavior with peers. For boys, results indicate considerable variability in social competence outcomes based on family type. Independent-Pluralistic families seemed to help boys overcome their social withdrawal. Separate/Protective families had boys with the least self-restraint at the end of middle childhood. Boys in the Traditional-Consensual households were the most socially

competent at the end of middle childhood in that they exhibited social self-restraint and were significantly less socially withdrawn.

Boys from Mixed/Laissez-faire families are also reasonably competent at the end of middle childhood. Girls in Laissez-faire families, however, showed both decreased self-restraint and more social withdrawal at the end of middle childhood. The uniformly high social competence for girls in the other family types may be another example of girls' greater resiliency in the face of stressful conditions (Luthar & Zigler, 1991).

In sum, family communication schemata influence resilience of children because they differentially affect children's social competence and their ability to develop successful peer relationships. The effects of the family communication environment appear to be more pronounced in boys in middle childhood than in girls. The most socially competent boys at the end of middle childhood came from Traditional-Consensual families.

### *Parental Caregiving*

In light of the seemingly unlimited number of parental variables reported to be associated with negative outcomes for children, Wahler and Dumas (1987) have argued that understanding this phenomenon could be facilitated by a focus on concepts such as parental acceptance and control. Jacob and Tennebaum (1986) have further specified that the keys to assessing child normality and psychopathology are the parenting dimensions of acceptance, control, and consistency (see also Jacobs, 1987). For example, negative-coercive patterns of parenting have been associated with antisocial behavioral development both because they reinforce oppositional behavior on the part of the child (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992) and because they serve as behavioral models of negative interaction styles that are later enacted with peers (Eron, 1987). In contrast, parental responsiveness, affection, and warmth have been associated with positive social outcomes for children (e.g., Greenwalk, 1990; Pettit, Bates, & Dodge, 1993;

Putallaz, 1987), presumably because such family environments minimize oppositional behavior, model skilled interpersonal interactions, and promote secure attachments between parent and child (Parpal & Maccoby, 1985; Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986).

Coerciveness and warmth do not manifest themselves uniformly across families. Research by Segrin and Fitzpatrick (1992) examined the level of verbal aggressiveness in various types of couples. In contrast to argumentativeness, which involves attacking the positions that others take on issues, verbal aggressiveness involves attacking the self-concept of the opponent (Infante & Rancer, 1996). Indeed, Bayer and Cegala (1992) argue that parental verbal aggressiveness directed toward children should be viewed as a form of child abuse. Traditional husband and wives in Consensual families were significantly less likely, and Separate/Protective couples were significantly more likely, to engage in verbal aggressiveness toward the spouse than were couples in any other type. In other words, although there is little open conflict in the Separate/Protective family, there is a good deal of negative communication in the form of attacks on the self-concepts of other family members. In that same study, Segrin and Fitzpatrick (1992) found that mothers in Separate/Protective families were significantly more depressed than were other mothers and fathers. The depression experienced by these mothers makes them less psychologically available to their children and is another source of stress in these types of families.

On a similar issue, Koerner and Cvancara (2002) conducted two observational studies of parent-adolescent interactions in 31 and 50 families, respectively. Families discussed issues that cause family conflict and possible solutions to those ongoing issues. Discussions were videotaped, transcribed, and analyzed using the Stiles (1992) Verbal Response Mode (VRM) coding scheme. The VRM categorizes verbal messages along a self-other continuum. In this study, Koerner and Cvancara found that behavioral ego support for children was significantly

greater in families with a high conversation orientation (i.e., Traditional/Consensual and Independent/Pluralistic) for both male and female adolescent children. Separate/Protective and Mixed/Laissez-faire families showed to be far less supportive of the development of a positive self-concept for their children.

### *Social Support*

Social support has been defined as "those social interactions or relationships that provide individuals with actual assistance or that embed individuals within a social system believed to provide love, caring or a sense of attachment to a valued social group or dyad (Hobfoll, 1988, p. 121). This definition encompasses the two major aspects of social support that have dominated research in the past two decades. Received social support refers to actual helping behaviors, whereas perceived social support refers to the belief that help would be provided when needed. Trust in the availability of support is in itself a protective factor after a stressful life event.

In families with adolescents, conflict can be extremely stressful. Families can deal with conflict through avoidance or venting of negative feelings and through seeking social support outside the family. Family members who say they can seek social support outside the family perceive that they have the ability to stay connected to network members who provide emotional and esteem support (Patterson & McCubbin, 1991). And, adolescents who experience a build-up of family stressors and strains without perceived social support are more likely to be involved in smoking, drinking, or drugs than are other adolescents (McCubbin, Needle, & Wilson, 1985).

Koerner and Fitzpatrick (1997) explored the role of perceived social support in a study of conflict in 35 families with adolescents. They found that Traditional/Consensual families are characterized by below average levels of conflict avoidance and medium levels of negative affect and seeking of social support. Thus, it appears that tendency to seek outside support

matches the level of negativity of conflict, allowing family members to deal well with the negative consequences of conflict.

Conflict in Independent/Pluralistic families is characterized by low levels of conflict avoidance and negative affect and a high level seeking of social support. Because these families do not avoid addressing their serious issues, they may be less likely to experience extreme negative feelings. In addition, members of these families are most likely to seek social support, suggesting that these families are the least likely to experience negative consequences from family conflict.

Separate/Protective Families are characterized by high conflict avoidance paired with high incidence of venting negative feelings and only a medium level of seeking social support. Thus, it appears that these families lack the mechanisms to productively deal with conflict, be it by discussing and resolving it with their families, or by obtaining social support from outsiders. As a consequence of their unresolved conflicts within their families, individuals in these families develop hostility and negative feelings toward their family members, which are expressed in short, but often inconsequential, emotional outbursts.

Mixed/Laissez-faire Families are characterized by a high level of conflict avoidance, a medium level of negative affect, and a low level of seeking social support. This pattern is consistent with people who are not every invested in their family relationships and often are emotionally divorced from their families. Conflict is mostly avoided and because their familial relationships are less important, unresolved conflicts are not particularly stressful and therefore do not create the hostility that is expressed in protective families. As in consensual families, the level of social support utilized by these families seems to match the negativity they experience in their conflict, allowing them to deal well with the consequences of their conflicts.

In sum, children in Independent/Pluralistic families experience the least negativity in conflict while simultaneously experiencing the most social support. Thus, they should be most resilient to negative effects of family conflict. Children of Traditional/Consensual and Mixed/Laissez-faire families experience conflict as somewhat more negative, but they still have some ability to obtain social support, suggesting a somewhat reduced resilience of these children to negative effects of family conflict. Children of Separate/Protective families experience the most negativity in family conflict while simultaneously obtaining the least social support. This suggests that these children are least resilient to the negative consequences of family conflict.

### *Conflict Management Skills*

Much of the research on communication competence in children has explored the child's acquisition of the linguistic code and the social rules for the appropriate use of that code. Although these are vital areas of study, Burleson and Samter (1990) remind us that neither of these two areas completely addresses the development of functional communication competence or the ability to use communicative resources strategically to accomplish personal and social goals: In other words, to successfully influence other people and to manage interpersonal conflicts. Rather, functional communication competence is the result of broader socialization of children that includes not only an appreciation of social rules and norms, but also beliefs related to the role of conflict in interpersonal relationships.

Going beyond the linguistic code and social norms, we (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002b) investigated the impact of family of origin on conflict management skills of adult children, utilizing Christensen and Sullaway's (1984) Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ) to measure children's conflict management skills outside the family. Defined as the ability to get people to modify their thoughts and behaviors, conflict and interpersonal influence can be viewed as behaviorally directed. Somewhere between managing feeling and managing activities

lies a group of communication activities that require the management of affect and behavior. Conflict management (the ability to reach mutually satisfying solutions in conflict) is this kind of skill, in that a source tries to modify the target's behavior but in a way that protects the feelings of the target.

In our study (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002b), 260 college students responded to the Revised Family Communication Patterns (RFCP) instrument allowing us to categorize individuals as stemming from one of the four predominant family types (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994). In addition to the RFCP, the participants completed the CPQ, which we used to measure the children's use of positive and negative conflict management strategies, such as problem solving, avoiding, resisting, and aggressing, in their adult romantic relationships.

*Problem solving.* There are many instances in social and personal relationships in which members experience divergent goals, needs, and interests and need to actively engage in problem solving to persuade or encourage one another to follow a given course of action. Problem solving is defined as a number of positive behaviors directed at clarifying the needs, goals, and values of the conflicting parties and to collaborative develop and implement mutually beneficial solutions. The development of problem solving skills is differentially manifested in different family types. Across all families, we found a significant negative effect ( $\beta = -.14$ ) of conformity orientation on problem solving, which was modified by a significant interaction with conversation orientation such that increased conversation orientation reinforced the main effect of conformity orientation. In other words, children of Independent/Pluralistic families exhibited the highest level of positive problem solving behaviors. Children of Laissez-faire families were somewhat less likely to engage in problem solving, while children of Traditional/Consensual and Separate/Protective families were least likely to employ problem positive solving behaviors.

*Conflict avoidance.* Closely related to problem solving is the issue of conflict avoidance. The best problem solving skills do no good if family members actively avoid rather than engage in conflict. Furthermore, unresolved conflicts often are associated with unmet needs and interests, and decreased relationship satisfaction. In regard to family of origin, we found that children of Independent/Pluralistic families were the least likely to avoid conflict. Children of Laissez-faire and Separate/Protective families were likely to only engage in what they would consider conflict about important issues but avoided petty conflict, while children of Traditional/Consensual families were the most conflict avoidant.

*Resisting.* Unlike conflict avoidance, which is a more passive way of preventing collaborative problem solving, resisting is the active act where a family member rejects others' attempts at interpersonal influence. Although not always a negative conflict strategy because it sometimes prevents one from accepting unfair or inferior solutions, resistance most frequently undermines collaborative problem solving. In our study, we found that family communication schemas had a significant effect for how likely children were to resist during problem solving. Our results showed that children of Traditional/Consensual and Separate/Protective families were significantly more likely to use resistance during problem solving than children of Independent/Pluralistic and Laissez-faire families.

*Hostility.* Another important outcome of family conflict has to do with that at one point or another, every family member has to compromise with, or accommodate, other family members and is therefore likely to experience the frustration of not having one's needs met. How these negative emotions are handled and expressed within interpersonal relationships contributes greatly to the emotional climate and quality of these relationships. In our study, we found that children of Traditional/Consensual and Separate/Protective families were most likely to express hostility during their interpersonal conflicts, which suggests that their interpersonal

relationships are more likely to suffer from their conflicts. Children of Independent/Pluralistic and Laissez-faire families, in contrast, reported relatively few instances of hostility in their interpersonal conflicts. Thus, it appears that the interpersonal relationships of children of these families are less threatened by their conflicts.

In sum, adult children of Independent/Pluralistic families exhibited the best conflict management skills in their romantic relationships. Not only did they employ the most positive conflict behavior, but they also reported low conflict avoidance, resistance and hostility. Clearly, in their families of origin, these children learned how to deal with conflict in a manner that enhances rather than diminishes interpersonal relationships. Adult children of Laissez-faire families exhibited the second best conflict skills, with a fair amount of positive behaviors and low resistance and avoidance. These children, however, were pretty high in conflict avoidance. Apparently, children in these families have learned not to be personally threatened by interpersonal conflict and are therefore able to remain largely positive during conflict with their partners.

Adult children of Separate/Protective had significantly worse conflict management skills. Not only do they avoid rather than engage conflict, they also report low levels of positive behaviors and high levels of resisting and hostility. This suggest that these children have learned not only that conflict is to be avoided because it undermines interpersonal relationships, but also that their poor problem solving skills let such conflicts become quite negative. The worst conflict management skills, however, were exhibited by adult children of Traditional/Consensual families. They were lowest in positive behaviors and highest in avoidance, resistance, and hostility. This was a real surprise, because conflict in these families is usually the most constructive. It seems that what makes interfamilial conflict so positive resides with the parents or is a function of the family system and children alone are not able to

reproduce that behavior in their own romantic relationships. Coupled with their high expectations based on their family experience, that failure might be particularly stinging, which could explain why they react so badly in conflicts with their partners.

### *Summary*

In this section, we reviewed research related to how the four family types relate to factors that help children to remain resilient in times of stress. Our studies have examined middle childhood, adolescence and young adulthood in families of these various types and found different outcomes regarding the social competence of children, the provision of parental caregiving, the solicitation of social support, and the development of problem solving skills.

Families with schemata that support a conversation orientation (Traditional/ Consensual & Independent/Pluralistic) are more likely to have children resilient to stress. According to Noller and Callan (1991), an open family communication climate is related to problem behaviors in adolescents in several ways. The quality of the communication dictates the quality of the relationship between parents and children and thus affects the child's bonding to the parent and his/her involvement in the peer group. Poor parent-child communication is related to adolescent involvement in alcohol, drug abuse and sexual intercourse. An open communication climate in the family allows the child and the adolescent to confide in the parents and to look to them as sources of information. Open communication is also related to less destructive conflict at both the family and marital level. Although Independent couples engage in more conflict than do Traditionals, they manage to resolve their conflicts and teach conflict management skills to their children. The management and resolution of conflict is more important than its sheer frequency.

The pressure to conform in an open system (i.e., Traditional/ Consensual) appears to have no immediate negative effects on children. There is some evidence, however, that these children do have significant problems to constructively engage in conflict in interpersonal relationships

in adulthood. The pressure to conform, however, in a closed system (i.e., Separate/ Protective system) has a number of immediate deleterious outcomes. Children in these families suffer severe assaults on their self-esteem, high levels of verbal aggressiveness, little comforting, and little acceptance of their self-disclosures. Boys in these environments leave middle childhood as more aggressive than boys in other families. And these families do not model effective conflict management or persuasive skills. Indeed, children in these families are not protected from stress nor are these families resources upon which children can draw in times of stress.

Finally, the Laissez-faire families marked neither by openness nor conformity pressure leave children open to peer group influence. This family communication environment is less negatively emotionally toned than is that of the Separate/Protective environment, although, again, there is little modeling of effective communication skills.

### Conclusion

When Jack McLeod first considered family communication patterns as a means to predict how children and adolescents react to social influence messages, he could never have anticipated the impact that his work would have on the study of family communication. Together with Steven Chaffee, he developed a family typology that not only has great heuristic value, but that time and time again has proved to be of great theoretical relevance and empirical validity in a wide range of family phenomena. As we have demonstrated in this chapter, their family types not only explain important differences in children's resiliency to negative life events, but they also are consistent with work on marriage types and integrate with it nicely into a larger framework family communication schemas.

Although Jack might have been surprised to find his work generating new conceptual work in the area of marital and family communication, we who are familiar with the scope of his contributions are not. Jack has always thought far beyond just localized problems and

theories designed to answer one question only. Rather, in his intellectual work he was never constrained by disciplinary boundaries and in that sense has anticipated and perpetuated the interdisciplinary nature of communication studies. Thus, it is no surprise that his work lives on not only in the study of mass communication processes and effects, but in all disciplines concerned with human communication and social interaction. Ultimately, any great theorist is recognized for what the contributions made to our understanding of human behavior.

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**Table 1**  
**Characteristics of Family Types**

*High Conversion Orientation*

<i>Low Conformity</i>	<i>High Conformity</i>
<i>Pluralistic Families</i>	<i>Consensual Families</i>
<p>Open communication and discussion of ideas is encouraged but with little emphasis on social constraint</p> <p>Fosters communication competence as well as independence of ideas</p>	<p>Strong pressures toward agreement</p> <p>Child encouraged to take interest in ideas without disturbing power in family hierarchy</p> <p>Child may adopt parents' views or may escape from parent-child interaction into fantasy</p>

*Low Conversion Orientation*

<i>Low Conformity</i>	<i>High Conformity</i>
<i>Laissez-Faire Families</i>	<i>Protective Families</i>
<p>Little parent-child interaction</p> <p>Child relatively more influenced By external social settings (e.g., peer groups)</p>	<p>Obedience is prized</p> <p>Little concern with conceptual matters</p> <p>Child is not well-prepared for dealing with outside influences and is easily influenced and persuaded</p>