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Toward a Theory of Family Communication

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

Scholars who study the family generally agree that the values, behaviors, and social environments that affect family structures have changed a great deal over the past 2 decades (Fitzpatrick & Vangelisti, 1995). 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, family members are expected to provide caregiving and support and to nurture one another. 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 research involving 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 work, explicating key concepts and terms, and discuss the relevance of intersubjectivity and interactivity for family communication theories. We then explore relational theories that employ relationship schemas and develop a gen-

eral 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 through 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: Because everyone knows what they are, everyone has a different idea of how they are defined.

Family. In the past decades, numerous social changes have caused us to reconsider our definition 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 seeing the family as composed of individuals connected primarily through legal and biological ties, scholars increasingly define family as a group of intimates who generate a sense of home and group identity and who experience a shared history and a shared 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 of phenomena researchers investigate, but also for the theories they develop. In effect, transactional definitions reflect 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 definitions (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 increasingly is losing its ecological validity. As a result, the validity of the entire theory is questionable.

Communication. Definitions of human communication are as problematic as 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 (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1993). At a minimum, then, communication theories should involve symbols, the cognitive processes by which they are created and interpreted, and the social conventions governing the relationships of symbols to their referents.

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 that are based on the model of Shannon and Weaver (1949), which essentially assume an unequivocal relationship between symbol and referent. 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 others' attention toward facts from which certain inferences are likely to be drawn. Discourse comprehension therefore also 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 (a) family members' expectations, (b) the structure of relevancies within the family, and (c) 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 include both intersubjectivity and interactivity. That is, it must contain a cognitive element that accounts for intersubjectivity and a behavioral element that accounts for how family members create, shape, and maintain the social unit through their interactions. 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 other's communicative acts.

Both intersubjectivity and interactivity reflect in a unique way a pair of linked problems in communication theory (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1993): (a) What is the appropriate unit of analysis: the individual or the dyad/group? and (b) is communicative behavior in a relationship best conceptualized as autonomous or interdependent? In other words, is it more useful to conceive of an interaction as a single complex social episode or as individual cognitive sequences 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. 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. Relationship schemas are one approach to studying communication that has led to tremendous advances in other areas of interpersonal communication and that promises to lead to a theory of family communication that meets the requirements outlined above. Based on the assumption that people are, at their core, social beings (Fiske, 1991) and therefore that 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 for the centrality of relational schemas to 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 subsets of knowledge stored in memory, or subschemas. The first subset 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 subset 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 subset (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 of things associated with the behavioral sequences, such as emotions and motivations (Baldwin, 1992).

Although these three subsets 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 subschemas 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 a 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 exists between self and other. In other words, the relationship between self-concept and other's appraisal is established in cognition by a relationship schema. In their research on gender differences, Acitelli and Young (1996) also observed 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.

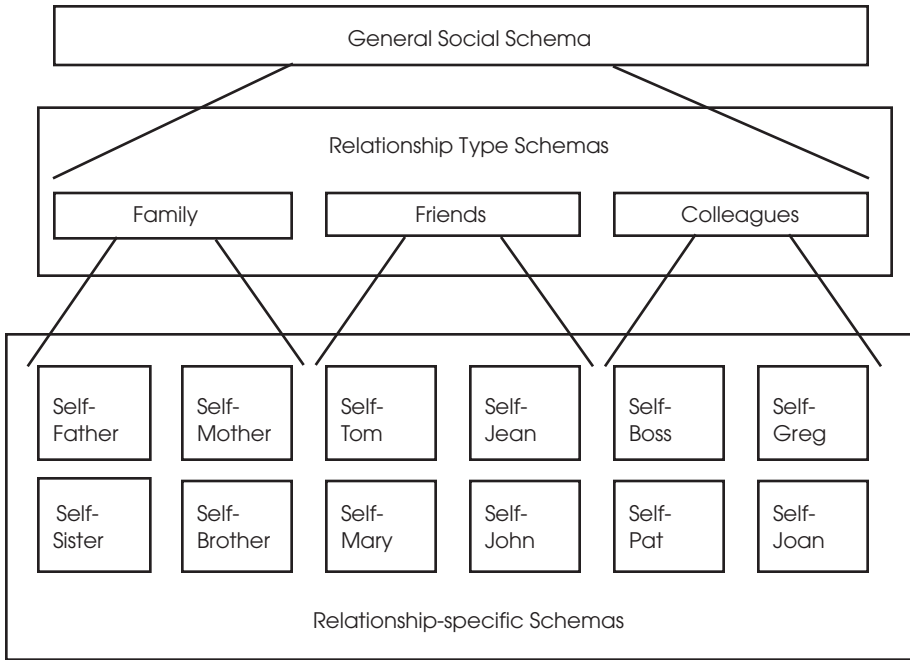
Thus, the first axiom of the general model of relational communication is this:

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. Baldwin's (1992) model is intriguing, and its core claim that cognition about the self, cognition about the other, and cognition about the relationship are interdependent is well supported. One shortcoming of the model, however, is that the boundaries of relationship schemas in Baldwin's current conceptualization are much broader than the way schemas have been traditionally defined. If relationship schemas, as Baldwin proposed, include the self-concept, the other schema, and all applicable relational scripts, it is unclear what conceptually is not part of a relationship schema. Furthermore, because these cognitions also exist at different levels of abstraction, it is difficult to determine the role relationship schemas play in relational cognition.

The wide-open boundaries of the relationship schema concept are mainly due to the inclusion of the self-concept and of interpersonal scripts into the relationship schema. Including the self-concept broadens the content of the relationship schema because of the centrality of the self-concept in cognition and its interconnectedness with almost all other cognitive structures. Including relational scripts broadens 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 becomes essentially impossible to distinguish between schemas for different relationships. As a result, each relationship schema easily can be construed to incorporate most, if not all, of a person's social knowledge. That is, with Baldwin's (1992) definition, there are no clear boundaries between the schemas for individual

Figure 1.
The Hierarchical Organization of a Person's Social Knowledge for Three Different Types of Relationships



relationships. Concepts with overly broad or fuzzy boundaries, however, lose their utility for communication theorists because they are difficult, if not impossible, to translate into specific predictions. 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.

Fletcher (Fletcher, 1993; Fletcher & Thomas, 1996) proposed a model with more narrowly defined relationship schemas. He achieved the narrower definition 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 relevant to only one particular interpersonal relationship. Specifically, Fletcher's model includes relationship schemas at three hierarchical levels (see Figure 1). On the most general level is knowledge that applies to all social relationships, the general social schema. Such general social 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 coworker 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 their own and of others' behavior. Whereas Fletcher's own research focuses on intimate relationships and on the exploration of close relationship schemas, he assumes that similar belief systems also exist within cognition for other types of relationships.

Finally, on the most specific level are relationship-specific schemas that apply to only one particular relationship a person has with a 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 from 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 other relationships.

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, such knowledge is 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 are 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 this:

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 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, people 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 from 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. 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 hierarchical levels 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 likely 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 indi-

vidual members of a different race. They simply affect only the relationship-specific schema, but not the relationship type schema.

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 schemas, however, are much more stable over time 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.

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 specific relationship schemas.

Accessing Relational Knowledge From Memory. By definition, the knowledge that exists at the level of a more specific schema is different from the knowledge that exists at a more abstract level. Consequently, there must be a process that determines which information is retrieved and used in relational information processing. We suggest that people will always first access their relationship-specific schemas for relevant information and then work their way up the hierarchical ladder. That is, if the information is not available in the relationship-specific schema, people will next access the relationship type schema. If the relevant information is also not available in the relationship type schema either, persons will finally access the general social schema.

We propose this process, because an identical cognitive process is operating for very similar cognitive tasks. Specifically, Pinker (1999) has shown this process to operate for the production of verb forms, which depends on the memory of specific irregular verbs and on the memory for rules of forming regular verbs. Based on the analysis of grammatical errors committed by adult speakers and of the process by which children acquire language, Pinker (1991, 1999) has collected an impressive array of evidence suggesting that, invariably, persons first search their memory for irregular forms when forming the past tense of verbs. 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 memory. Some of the evidence supporting this conclusion is the fact that, over time, traditionally irregular verbs become regular if they are used less frequently (e.g., *chide-chide* vs. *chide-chided*), because their infrequent use does not allow language users to hear them

often enough to memorize their irregular forms (Pinker, 1991). Additional evidence comes from studies showing that frequency of use of a verb in a language predicts the time it takes speakers to form the past tense of irregular verbs, but not of regular verbs, and that ratings of the “naturalness” of the past tense of irregular verbs correlates with their frequency in a language, whereas the naturalness ratings of the past tense of regular verbs is unaffected by frequency in language (Pinker, 1991).

The parallels to relational schemas are immediately apparent. If specific knowledge regarding the particular relationship exists in memory, it is retrieved first and used in relational cognition, such as the interpretation of a behavior or the forming of action plans. If such specific knowledge does not exist, however, a person will access knowledge that is stored in relationship type schemas or general social schemas for use in relational cognition. Thus, much like when producing grammatical speech, a person engaging in social behavior first looks in memory for knowledge that fits the unique relational situation and, only if no such knowledge is found, will the person use more generally applicable rules and norms. That people access relationship-specific schemas before they access relationship type schemas or the general social schema logically implies that, in cases where the knowledge in different schemas is contradictory, the more specific relationship schema will have the greater influence on cognitive processing than a more general schema.

Based on our understanding of how information that is stored in different schemas is accessed, the fourth axiom of the general model of relational communication is this:

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.

The Influence of Relational Schemas on Interpersonal Communication. Consistent with the role that other cognitive schemas play in social cognition (Fiske & Taylor, 1991), we expect relational schemas to influence interpersonal communicative behaviors through their influence on information processing, both controlled and automatic (Fletcher & Thomas, 1996). That is, relational schemas influence the encoding and decoding of information, the inferences and evaluations people make, how they memorize social events, their information-seeking behavior, and ultimately their interpersonal behaviors. Recent research on relational schemas 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 likely to bias decision making.

In regard to inferences and evaluations, Murray, Holmes, MacDonald, and Ellsworth (1998) reported that persons' evaluations of themselves, their perceptions of their partners' regard, and their evaluations of their relationships are interdependent and that people adjust them in a fashion that is self-enhancing. Similarly indicative of relationship schemas' influence on drawing inferences, Murray and Holmes (1996) found that those in currently satisfying relationships have positively biased (idealized) perceptions of their partners and of their partners' behaviors. In a related vein, Holmberg and Veroff (1996) found that memories that people have of their partners and of 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 the partners' 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 automatic and controlled cognitive processes and on 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 this:

A5: 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 above is a general model that applies to all interpersonal relationships. In this part of the article, we focus on family relationships only and show how the general model 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

Table 1.
The Five
Axioms of
the General
Model of
Relationship
Schemas in
Communi-
cation

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- 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 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: Relational schemas affect relational communication through their influence on automatic and controlled cognitive processes.
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important interpersonal relationships we have in our lives. It is therefore particularly useful to employ 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 suggests that a theory of family communication that is based on a schematic representation of relational knowledge must be consistent with the five axioms that define the general model. Consistent with Axiom 1, which specifies the type of knowledge contained in relationship schemas, we claim that family relationship schemas contain declarative and procedural knowledge, as well as interpersonal scripts. 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 determines most of a family's communication behavior is contained in a family type relationship schema. That is, this knowledge 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 3, which specifies the relative stability of relational knowledge over time at different levels of specificity, we claim that the relational knowledge contained in family relationship schemas is relatively stable and likely to change only after repeated similar experiences with all family members. Consistent with Axiom 4, which specifies the way the different schemas are accessed from memory, we argue that in social information processing, family members will always try first to access their relationship-specific schemas before accessing their family relationship schema. Similarly, only when there is also no rel-

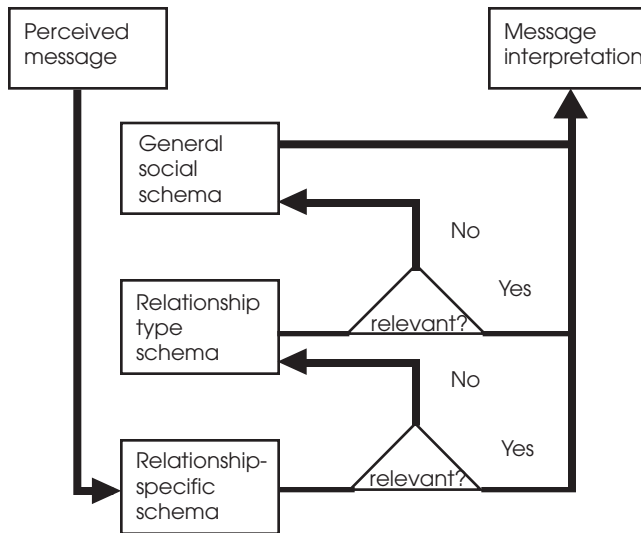


Figure 2. The Process of Accessing Relational Knowledge From Different Relational Schemas in the Interpretation of a Message

evant information in the family relationship schema will persons access their general social schema (see Figure 2). Finally, consistent with Axiom 5, we claim that family relationship schemas influence automatic and controlled processing.

Because the process by which the different relationship schemas are accessed in information processing is crucial to understanding the role that family relationship schemas play in communication, we illustrate this process by an example: Growing up in a very outspoken family, Sue has developed the belief that family members should be outspoken with one another, and this belief has become a 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 tends to 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 be based both on experiences with family members and on cultural norms acquired through socialization. Thus, family relationship schemas con-

tain knowledge that is both experiential and prescriptive and that is central to all relationships with family members.

The Content of Family Relationship Schemas. As already stated, family relationship schemas contain declarative and procedural knowledge and interpersonal scripts that apply to all relationships with family members. Because it is ultimately the knowledge that is contained in family relationship schemas that determines family communication, it is imperative to get a better understanding of what kinds of knowledge constitute family relationship schemas. A good starting point for this investigation is the beliefs that Fletcher (1993; Fletcher & Thomas, 1996) identified 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 strongly believe that passion is at the foundation of a close romantic relationship, whereas others consider passion to be secondary to their relationship. Similarly, whereas some 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 an impact on their relationship satisfaction. What is similar for all, however, is that within their romantic relationship type schema, people have beliefs about their relationship's intimacy, individuality, passion, and external factors.

Because of the similarity between romantic and familial relationships, we 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 previous research that has shown communication's importance for family communication and functioning (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, in press), 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 to various outcomes for families, such as conflict and conflict resolution (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997a), children's resiliency to adverse environmental influences (Fitzpatrick & Koerner, 1996), children's future romantic relationships (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997b), utilization of social self-restraint and social withdrawal behaviors (Fitzpatrick, Marshall, Leutwiler, & Krcmer, 1996), enactment of family rituals (Baxter & Clark, 1996), and the effects of parents' work environments on the family context (Ritchie, 1997).

The first belief, *conversation orientation*, is defined as the degree to which families create a climate in which 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 or topics discussed. These families spend a lot of time interacting with each other, and family members share their individual activities, thoughts, and feelings with one another. 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 among 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 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 atti-

tudes. Family interactions typically focus on harmony, conflict avoidance, and the interdependence of family members. In intergenerational 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 intergenerational exchanges, communication reflects the equality of all family members, and children, for example, 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 that are external to the family, and they expect resources such as space and money to be 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 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 affects family communication, it is not sufficient to know only that belief; it is as well necessary to know the other belief. 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, therefore, is of theoretical significance and not just a convenient way of describing four family types that are created by crossing these two dimensions.

Families high in both conversation orientation and conformity orientation are labeled *consensual*. Their communication is characterized by a tension between pressure to agree and to preserve the existing hierarchy within the family, on the one hand, and an interest in open communication and in exploring new ideas, on the other hand. That is, parents in these families are very interested in their children and what the children have to say, but at the same time also believe that they should make decisions for the family and for the children. They resolve this tension by listening to their children and by spending time and energy in explaining their decisions to their children in the hope that their children will understand the reasoning, beliefs, and values behind the parents' decisions.

Families high in conversation orientation but low in conformity orientation are labeled *pluralistic*. Communication in pluralistic families is characterized by open, unconstrained discussions that are open to and involve all family members. Parents in these families do not feel the need to be in control of their children or to make all their decisions for them. This parental attitude leads to family discussions where opinions are evaluated based on the merit of the arguments that support them rather than on which family members support them. That is, parents are willing to accept their children's opinions and to let them participate equally in family decision making.

Families low on conversation orientation but high on conformity orientation are labeled *protective*. Communication in protective families is characterized by an emphasis on obedience to parental authority and by little concern for conceptual matters or for open communication within the family. Parents in these families believe that they should be making the decisions for their families and their children, and they see little value in explaining their reasoning to their children.

Families low in both conversation orientation and conformity orientation are labeled *laissez-faire*. Their communication is characterized by few and usually uninvolved interactions among family members that usually concern only a limited number of topics. Parents in laissez-faire families do believe that all family members should be able to make their own decisions, but, unlike parents in pluralistic families, they have little interest in their children's decisions, nor do they value communicating with them. Most members of laissez-faire families are emotionally divorced from their families.

The Final Model. Based on the general model of the role of relationship schemas for interpersonal communication and on the research describing the content of familial relationship schemas, we are now ready to 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 as described in the general model.

That is, they are part of a hierarchical organization of relational knowledge 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, at a minimum, beliefs about intimacy, individuality, affection, external factors, conversation orientation, and conformity orientation.

Conclusion

In this article, 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.

Our theory of family communication is based on the more general theory of relational schemas outlined above. As such, it is a cognitive model of family communication that does not explicitly address intersubjectivity or interactivity. 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.

Family relationship schemas imply intersubjectivity. Because relationship type schemas are formed based on repeated experiences in the same type of relationship, family relationship schemas are based on repeated experiences with family members that are formed in interactions involving most or all family members. As a result, the experiential bases of the family relationship schemas for all family members are very similar, if not identical. In addition, many of the other socializing influences that determine family relationship schemas are shared as well. Whether they be media descriptions of family that are consumed together, family lore that is shared, or family traditions that are discussed, families experience many 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 one of the main functions of family communication is for family members to define themselves as a family and to negotiate the relationships they have with one another. Parents consistently educate children about how to behave in the family context and provide important feedback to the children about how others react to them and to their behavior. Conversely, children react to their parents' behavior, question their instructions, and point out inconsistencies 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 explicitly to acknowledge, discuss, and renegotiate the rules and norms that govern their interactions and relationships, which for most other social relationships remain largely unspoken. In sum, family relationship schemas are clearly the outcomes of family interactivity.

By locating family relationship schemas at the level of relationship type schemas, the model accounts for both intersubjectivity and interactivity in family communication. It thereby meets the requirement we outlined at the outset of this article that a theory of family communication must take the specific communication context of the family into account. In addition, the model also meets the second requirement we formulated, that a theory of family communication be based on a transactional definition of the family. Because family relationship schemas exist in individuals' cognition, they do not require any specific constellation of family members to constitute a family. Thus, the theory is compatible with a transactional definition of the family.

Of course, the validity of our theoretical model thus far has not been established through empirical research. Although there is a lot of data, not all of which we reviewed in this article, that is consistent with the model, the model and the specific hypotheses that can be derived from it have not thus far been explicitly tested. 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 might 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 communicative behavior that are both richer, and, we hope, more valid than models that exclude a consideration of communication.

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