

CHAPTER 1

The Challenge of Defining “Family”

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The family is a critically important social institution with huge implications for laypeople, policy makers, and scholars alike. As Socha significantly noted in 1999, family comprises the first group to which a person belongs, and usually provides the most long-lasting group membership for individuals. In addition, as we and others have commented (e.g. Floyd, Mikkelsen, & Judd, 2006; Galvin, 2006; Turner & West, 2013), in the United States, family is seen as a group that is qualitatively different from any other group to which a person belongs. The enduring bonds of obligation, the unique communication behaviors, the evolution through time, as well as the expectations for affection and support that characterize family set it apart from other groups. Further, the family’s contributions to an individual’s sense of identity and self-worth

have long been noted, and as Olson, Baiocchi-Wagner, Kratzer, and Symonds (2012) comment, “. . . our families provide the glue that connects all the parts of our lives—for better and for worse” (p. 1). In addition, Braithwaite and her colleagues (2010) report that the family is “the most pervasive and central of human institutions” (p. 389). Clearly, family is a term signifying something of importance to people, and a term that is fraught with meaning. The question is: *what* does it mean?

When a term is as important to people as family is, then the process of defining it also becomes important. Yet, defining family often is a problem that bedevils policy makers, laypeople, and scholars alike. In the realm of public policy, Tankersley (2008) comments that the definition of family is at the core of many political debates as well as policy-making discussions. The task of defining family

becomes critical as politicians try to develop laws and policies affecting families. The myriad laws related to family life have had a profound effect upon family members. Specific laws, including the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) and the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA), continue to influence nearly every family today. More general policies, too, including those related to child custody, unemployment benefits, and earned income tax credits also affect how policy contributes to the definition process. In many ways, these laws and policies comment on the definition of family either specifically as in the 2013 U.S. Supreme Court decision allowing married same-sex couples to receive federal benefits, or by implication, as in the FMLA.

Many questions attend the task of defining family, including but not limited to: Is a difference implied in saying “the family” as opposed to “family?” And, what might that difference mean (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995)? Do we see family as a refuge from outside trauma and a source of comfort and support in the face of life’s stressors? Or do we imagine the family as a crucible for pain and conflict? Or is it both? Or neither? For that matter, when we invoke the concept of family, what people do we include? Are we speaking of people who share living space, who are related by blood, or those who, through some qualitative algorithm, *feel* like family to us? When we mention family, are we talking about those who raised us (our families-of-origin), those to whom we were born (our families-of-procreation), those with whom we currently live, or some other configuration? Is anyone, or any entity, allowed to have the final say in defining family? If we privilege one family form over others, what does that mean about the forms we leave out of our definition?

Given these complexities, the purpose of this chapter is four-fold. First, we explore a number of considerations that make defining family complicated. We then we review a body of research that specifically attempts to confront the problems of defining family, with a special emphasis on the communication literature. Third, we review

communication literature and practice that skirts the definitional problem in favor of advancing typologies of family. Finally, we look to the future and pose a research (and practical) agenda regarding family definition.

Difficulties in Creating a Definition of Family

The task of defining family may be complicated by the myriad choices currently affecting family structures. Relational choices, including cohabitation, divorce, and postdivorce friendships, have influenced the composition of the Western family. Reproductive technologies, including contraception, surrogacy, and in vitro fertilization have provided both women and men with opportunities to plan how many children to have, whether to have children at all, or whether to involve others in the process of child bearing for the family. In addition other technologies may affect who is a member of the family. For instance, online communication allows people to interact across geographic space, and this may have an effect on who is considered a family member. Grandparents, and other extended family members, may become more central to a family’s functioning through their ability to Skype with and text their grandchildren (Turner, 2012). As Webb, Ledbetter, and Norwood (Chapter 23, this volume) observe, families are formed via technologically assisted communication through practices like online adoptions or the facilitation of assisted reproductive technologies such as surrogacy or egg and sperm donors. Technologically assisted communication also serves to maintain family ties, as Webb et al. note. Social media such as Facebook, for example, have been used to seek reassurance from others (Clerkin, Smith, & Hames, in press) and to alleviate loneliness for college students who have moved away from their families-of-origin (Lou, Yan, Nickerson, McMorris, 2012). Yet, if such reassurance from family members has not been provided, what effect does this have upon the family? Are the college students beginning to be edged out of the definition?

Further, we cannot ignore the influence of the media on shaping the definition of family, because so many people in the United States base their ideas about family on mediated images (see, for example, Tyus, Chapter 22, this volume). Television, talk radio, social media, newspapers, and popular press all remain instrumental teachers about what constitutes family. Watching *Modern Family*, for instance, gives the viewer some insights into a gay-father-headed household. Listening to Rush Limbaugh, a conservative talk show host, provides listeners with Limbaugh's views on the effects immigration has on families. Reading tweets from unmarried Hollywood couples who are recent parents sends messages about possibilities for parenting and family life. Scanning some 2013 headlines relevant to families, reveals the following messages about what constitutes family (and what does not): "Millennials, in Their Parents' Basements" (Rampell, 2013); "Controversy Continues Over Gay Parenting Study" (Inside Higher Education, 2013); and "For Stronger Families, Focus on Childcare, Not Birthrates" (Gregory, 2013).

Another complicating factor for understanding the definition of family concerns the economy. The financial ebbs and flows in the United States affect the family unit and even strike at people's conception of family. Some family members, because of job loss, reduced labor hours, or unemployment, are incapable of living alone. These members frequently return to their family-of-origin because they can no longer afford housing expenses. A man and his children may return to his parents' house because he can no longer sustain childcare costs. A daughter who could not get a job after college might decide to return to live with her single mother. A recently unemployed family member may have to take a job in a city 500 miles away, resulting in a change in the household's occupants, and perhaps, in the definition of the family itself.

As Harris and González (Chapter 2, this volume) point out, culture is a critical factor in considering the meaning of family. From a demographic vantage point, the waves of immigrants who currently live in the United States have had

a profound effect upon family definitions. Because immigrants arrive with various values related to family life (e.g., parenting, discipline, patterns of communication), it is increasingly difficult to establish a universal definition for family. For example, some immigrants arrive with a deep reverence for their elders, and households are established with this multigenerational configuration. Other immigrants arrive in the United States with few, if any, of their family members, thereby creating an entirely different family arrangement (e.g., families who are geographically separated or new families of volunteer members). And, deportation also necessarily affects housing insecurity and in some cases, permanent family dissolution (Dreby, 2012). Finally, it is relevant to point out that internal migration patterns may alter the emotional support of kin; external members of the family, therefore, may necessarily become part of the newly configured family type.

The cultural conversation about what and who should be included in the definition of family has been taking place for quite some time. Years ago, these dialogues may have been relegated to holiday dinners, where family members met, perhaps for the only time all year, and weighed in on social issues. While some writers have encouraged benign conversational starters for such times ("If you were running for mayor, what would be your campaign platform?"), the reality is that many family members have no problem tackling difficult topics. Among those topics is family itself. Myriad areas related to family are rife for Thanksgiving Day banter around the table: same-sex marriage, caring for aging family members, divorce, and surrogate mothers among others. At first glance, such difficult dialogues may be viewed as simply vehicles for family members to exhibit strong opinions. Yet, these interactions may provide families with both clarity and confusion about what constitutes a family, the dynamics of family life, and the various arrangements and configurations related to family.

The preceding discussion illustrates and underscores the difficulty in achieving a scholarly and lay consensus on the existence of a universal

definition for the term family. The numerous organic and cultural influences upon families today make it nearly impossible to construct a single unifying definition. As society changes and evolves, so, too, does our conception of family. Change has been a constant feature in our notions about the family. Bernardes (2002), for example, estimates that the term family has over 200 different meanings in Western cultures alone. Despite the obvious difficulties of the task, researchers continue to work toward defining family in a variety of different ways. In the following section, we discuss some of these approaches.

Scholarly Efforts Toward Creating a Definition

Among the more difficult scholarly tasks for family communication researchers is defining the term family. Further, as Holtzman (2008) observes, conceptions of family by policy makers and laypeople affect how scholars frame family as well. Holtzman comments that longstanding debates over the definition of *family* intensify as social changes alter the cultural conception of the term. In turn, these debates create complications and evolution in the approaches that scholars take when defining family. In the end, *family* and all of its corresponding vectors provide communication researchers with a host of complexities that are difficult to reconcile. Scholars sometimes reference this problem of definition by referring to the term in question as a “site of struggle” (Turner & West, 2013; Coontz, 1988). By this, they mean that citizens, cultures, political leaders, as well as researchers have multiple meanings in mind when they say the word *family*, and these differing meanings compete with one another, sometimes causing enormous controversies. Here we review some of the approaches that scholars have taken in response to the problem of defining family as well as some of the specific definitions that result. We discuss research that takes a conceptual approach to defining family first and then articulate the lens approach favored

by some scholars. We also briefly review literature that adopts the social construction or discourse dependent approach followed by research that considers the definition through the perspective of laypeople as well as scholars. Finally, we explore the cultural and class implications implicit in the process of defining family.

The Conceptual Approach

Many researchers have offered specific, relatively concise, conceptual definitions for the term family, perhaps beginning with Burgess’s (1926) classic definition stating that the family consists of a unity of interacting personalities. Olson et al. (2012) profile 10 examples of conceptual definitions for family. These include the following: “[t]he family is a social group characterized by common residence, economic cooperation, and reproduction. It includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, own or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting adults” (Murdock, 1949, p. 1, cited in Olson et al., p. 5); “[a] family is a set of relationships determined by biology, adoption, marriage, and in some societies, social designation, and existing even in the absence of contract or affective involvement, and in some cases, even after the death of certain members” (Bedford & Blieszner, 1997, p. 526, cited in Olson et al., p. 5); and “[a] social group of two or more persons, characterized by ongoing interdependence with long-term commitments that stem from blood, law, or affection” (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006, p. 3, cited in Olson et al., p. 5). Elsewhere we have provided the following conceptual definition:

A family is a self-defined group of intimates who create and maintain themselves through their own interactions and their interactions with others; a family may include both voluntary and involuntary relationships; it creates both literal and symbolic internal and

external boundaries; and it evolves through time: It has a history, a present, and a future. (Turner & West, 2013, p. 9)

Some researchers (i.e. Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004) have distilled some of the common elements across these conceptual definitions to create some general perspectives for defining family. For instance, Koerner and Fitzpatrick argued that three perspectives describe the various conceptual definitions advanced by researchers. They noted that conceptual definitions based on the presence or absence of certain members (e.g., mothers, fathers, grandparents, and so forth) could be classified as structural definitions. Secondly, Koerner and Fitzpatrick noted that other definitions were predicated on the group accomplishing certain social and psychological tasks, and they labeled these functional definitions. Finally, they claimed that some definitions focused on the emotional ties formed in families as well as their evolutionary nature resulting in a shared past and the expectation of a common future. Koerner and Fitzpatrick called these transactional definitions.

Somewhat similarly, other researchers have examined the underlying conceptual categories that ground the types of definitions we have reviewed. These scholars have discussed what they call the lenses shaping a researcher's approach to defining family. We now address the lens approach to defining family.

The Lens Approach

Floyd and his colleagues, Mikkelson and Judd (2006) argued that when scholars define family they usually do it by using one or more of three lenses: (1) a structural lens that focuses on biological relationships (they label this the biogenetic lens), (2) a legal lens that concentrates on relationships sanctioned by the laws of a given culture (they call this a sociolegal lens), or (3) a functional lens that spotlights the roles that people play relative to one another and the

extent to which people "feel and act like family" (p. 27) (this is called a role lens). The role lens highlights communication for being the connecting tissue that binds people into family, the sociolegal lens focuses on social behaviors that have been codified into laws that define family relationships, and the biogenetic lens turns away from social behaviors, and instead uses two criteria for determining the definition of family: (1) the extent to which a relationship is directly reproductive, at least potentially, and (2) whether or not people share genetic material. Although Floyd and his coauthors note that each lens has advantages as well as disadvantages for scholars, they especially commend the biogenetic lens. They observe that this lens is extremely useful for scholarship for at least two reasons. First, it is much easier for a researcher to find families to study using this lens compared to the others, and, second, the biogenetic lens allows researchers to be consistent in defining and recruiting families to study.

The Social Construction or Discourse-Dependence Approach

Another approach for defining family is often called social construction because it is grounded in the notion of how people *do* family, or how family members' behaviors construct a sense of "familiarity" (e.g., Allen, Blieszner, & Roberto, 2011; Braithwaite et al., 2010). In a study of how children in England think about kinship, Mason and Tipper (2008) exemplify this approach. They say that creativity is a part of developing family, because kinship is not a given, but rather is shaped and molded "by people's own family negotiations and practices as well as through shifting public understandings and legal definitions of what is considered relatedness" (p. 441). This line of thinking was expanded upon by Galvin (2006). She notes the large role that communication plays in the process of defining family, and she refers to families as discourse-dependent, or engaged in using communication

to define themselves as family. Galvin acknowledges that all families are somewhat discourse-dependent, and by this she means that all families rely on communication behaviors to "talk family into being." Families use a variety of rituals, stories, pet names, and other communication behaviors to accomplish this task. However, Galvin observes that families who do not resemble one another physically, and in fact, may not be biologically related to each other, (such as European American parents who have adopted children from Korea, for instance) are the most discourse-dependent. Galvin asserts that these families talk their relationships into family status by naming, justifying, and defending them. In this argument, Galvin seems to be extending Floyd, et al.'s (2006) role lens, explaining how communication is used to create and recreate the familial roles that people play relative to one another. Galvin makes the implicit argument that communicating familial role behaviors captures the essence of what family is in people's lived experiences.

Laypeople's Definitions

Rather than propose a definition themselves, some researchers (e.g. Weigel, 2008; Holtzman, 2008) have been interested in how laypeople define family and how these definitions compare to scholars' definitions. For instance, Leslie Baxter and her colleagues (2009) found some consistency in their respondents' definitions with the biogenetic and sociolegal approaches to defining family. Yet, they also observed subtle signs in their data that laypeople were taking a more expansive approach to defining family than scholars, using those lenses, do. For example, the participants in their study revealed that the presence of frequent communication among members increased the likelihood that they would label the group a family regardless of their biological or legal status. In addition, the authors noted that there may be some reciprocity between scholars' and laypeople's definitions, such that "when the research community defines 'family'

along traditional lines, this definition functions to marginalize our understanding of alternative family forms" (p. 186). This insight suggests that researchers have a greater role in the definitional struggle than they may have realized.

Edwards and Graham (2009) were also interested in the question of how laypeople defined family. They discovered that people's perceptions about communication had a relationship with how they defined the concept of family. Further, Edwards and Graham's findings lend support for the argument that laypeople use the role lens for defining family. Advocating a role lens was associated with all of the implicit theories that people held about communication.

Gillis (1996) was interested in how laypeople *think* about family life. In examining this aspect of the definition, Gillis stated that,

...we all have two families, one that we live *with* and another we live *by*. We would like the two to be the same, but they are not. Too often the families we live with exhibit the kind of self-interested, competitive, divisive behavior that we have come to associate with the market economy and the public sphere. Often fragmented and impermanent, they are much less reliable than the imagined families we live by. The latter are never allowed to let us down. Constituted through myth, ritual, and image, they must be forever nurturing and protective, and we will go to any lengths to ensure that they are so, even if it means mystifying the realities of family life. (p. xv)

Stacey (1999) observed that the family of fables that Gillis refers to as the family we live *by* is more compelling than "the messy, improvisational, patchwork bonds of postmodern family life . . . [and since these fabled families] function as pivotal elements in our distinctive national imagination, these symbolic families are also far more stable than any in which past generations ever dwelled" (p. 489). These scholars argue that laypeople tend to idealize the family and overload

it with impossible expectations because it is reassuring to think about the family as an institution of unconditional love and constant support, even when our own experiences may not conform to this definition.

Culture and Social Class

Researchers also have noted that the entire process of defining family must be filtered through the prism of culture and social class (see Harris and González, Chapter 2, this volume). For instance, Dill (2001) reminds us that many conceptual definitions of family are predicated on White, middle-class norms. Dill cautions that these definitions cannot extend universally because White, middle-class family norms depend upon different family arrangements from other classes and racial groups. For instance, White middle-class children could not have begun staying home longer in the 19th century, nor could their mothers have redirected their time to caring for them, without the labor of slaves and immigrants who provided cotton to the mills, cheap factory clothes, and household help. Thus, the new construction of childhood and motherhood that arose in the 19th century was not extended to slave and poor immigrant families.

Stewart (2007) asks the question who is kin or what is family?, but she specifically examines that question through African American family practices. She found, consistent with other research on the topic (e.g. Dill, 2001), that her respondents had an expansive definition for family, including extended members, as well as voluntary members or “fictive kin.” Stewart also found, however, that socioeconomic status did mediate this result somewhat in that members of higher socioeconomic groups made a distinction between immediate and extended family, although they included them all in the definition. Members of lower socioeconomic groups did not make the same distinction.

Summary

Defining family is a complex task and the definition differs depending on which approach a researcher takes. The task is further complicated because of the wide range of diversity characterizing the contemporary U.S. family. In examining the family in the 21st century, Bachman (2008) observes that it is “post-traditional” because “it does not adhere to one specific structural model: it is fluid, not static; inclusive, not exclusive; diverse, not monolithic” (p. 44). However, Bachman also notes that social support for such diversity is contested, lending support to our assertion about the struggle over defining family. Interestingly, however, Coontz (2005) argues that “the diversity in U.S. families today is probably no larger than in most periods in the past” (p. 78). Indeed, she states, “family variability” (p. 66) has been with us for centuries.

Contemporary scholars in family communication typically agree that each family is unique in that each unit comes with its own set of rules, roles, cultural backgrounds, and patterns of interaction. While this perspective seemingly has value, viewing each family as a distinctive system presents scholarly challenges. Perhaps as response to these challenges, some researchers have turned their attention away from a specific definition of family and have instead speculated about classifying the wide variety of families into a smaller, more manageable, set of types. We now address the topic of family typologies.

Typologies of Family

Typologies have often been used in the field of family communication (and family studies more generally) as a way to understand families as well as the interactions that take place within them. As Metts and Asbury (Chapter 3, this volume) observe, typologies consist of a list of categories (called types) “that are subsets of a larger construct and are distinguished by dimensions, qualities,

or characteristics.” By creating a typology of families, scholars are able to avoid some of the problems attending the definitional process for the larger construct (i.e. family) altogether and move on to understanding the subsets that comprise it. Many family typologies exist. Below we review two predominant ones, each with a unique focus: Kantor and Lehr’s Family Types (1975) and Fitzpatrick’s Couple Types (Fitzpatrick, 1977; 1988), as well as a demographic typology that begins to capture the diversity of family living arrangements in the contemporary United States.

Kantor and Lehr’s Family Types

Drawing data from 19 families, Kantor and Lehr’s (1975) ethnographic study continues to be cited as a preeminent family typology. Their research concluded that a family’s main goal is distance regulation. Families, according to Kantor and Lehr, are open, adaptive, complex and continuously processing information. Family members use such resources as time (clock and calendar), space, and energy to gain the goals of power (autonomy and freedom), meaning (family identity), and affect (closeness and compassion). Mapping a family’s use of these resources, Kantor and Lehr discovered three types of families: closed, open, and random.

Closed families are those families where stability is a major goal in all family processes. In these families, family loyalty supersedes the loyalty one provides a friend. Rules and judgments are clear and decisions are made based upon traditional ways of looking at the world. Closed families advocate that family members project a sense of unity, even though unity may be unrealized. Rules are usually undertaken from top-down (parent/s-children) and there are usually fixed times related to dinner, bedtimes, and other family activities. Boundaries are rather impenetrable in that each family member may have a specific space that has been personalized and is not openly accessible.

Open families have less rigidity than closed families. These families have a participatory type of decision making, and rules are generally agreed upon by family members. Meal times are less group-centered and allow variability for individuals’ schedules. Open families emote more than closed families, and there is an effort toward nurturing family members. While there is some disagreement in open families, this conflict is dealt with by accepting divergent points of view and entertaining mutually acceptable resolutions.

A random family has been likened to a madhouse with a great deal of unregulated activity and unpredictability everywhere. The timetables for eating and other family activities are not fixed, and there is an emphasis on novelty. Whereas a goal in a closed family is stability and a goal in the open family is flexibility, a goal of a random family is spontaneity. Therefore, there is a great deal of uncertainty in these families. The rules that do exist are not embraced as much as is the decision to follow (or break) a rule.

Fitzpatrick’s Couple Types

Building on Kantor and Lehr’s (1975) work, and bringing it into the communication field, Fitzpatrick’s (1977, 1988) couple typology specifically looks at how people perceive a marital relationship and construct an “ideology” of marriage. This typology has been utilized a great deal in family communication scholarship (e.g., Givertz, Segrin, & Hanzel, 2009; Young, Curran, & Totenhagen, 2013). Fitzpatrick found three dimensions underlying marital ideologies: conventionality (or how much a person subscribes to traditional sex roles), interdependence (or how much physical and psychological space partners feel is appropriate in marriage), and conflict (or how much conflict is valued or avoided in marriage). From these dimensions, Fitzpatrick created a questionnaire that she termed the Relational Dimensions Instrument (RDI). After

administering the RDI to thousands of participants, Fitzpatrick found three marital types that she labeled Traditionals, Independents, and Separates.

With respect to each couple type, Fitzpatrick (1977) discovered several themes. First, Traditional Couples place an emphasis on stability over spontaneity. Their relationship contains conflict, although these couples are usually not that assertive. Traditionals are not conflict avoidant, but they do not need to engage in a great deal of conflict, because both partners generally embrace gendered divisions of labor and endorse gendered social conventions (e.g., a wife taking her husband's name upon marriage). Independent Couples differ from Traditional Couples in several ways. First, these couples adhere to the belief that individual freedom should not be constrained by marriage. Although Independents believe in a loving marriage, they are unwilling to see marriage as a merging of two people into one. Sharing is instrumental in this couple type, and Independent Couples place a premium on companionship, while maintaining their individuality. Independents believe they should not be bound by conventional sex roles and are willing to embrace conflict over how the division of labor should be enacted in their relationship. Finally, Separate Couples stress individual freedom over relationship maintenance. These couples opt for both psychological and physical distance in marriage. Interestingly, Separates also report being conflict avoidant in their marriages.

Fitzpatrick (1977) argued that, prior to her work, couples could be seen as falling into only one of two categories: satisfied or dissatisfied. Her typology showed that couples could be classified by the way they conducted their marriages (or, at least the way they thought marriages should be conducted). Fitzpatrick argued that couples could be happy or unhappy in any of the three types she advanced. However, some researchers have noted that the labels Fitzpatrick chose are not completely neutral in valence, and that, in the United States (especially in 1977) it

is preferable to be traditional or independent than it is to be separate in your marriage. And, Fitzpatrick herself described Separate Couples as "emotionally divorced." Further, Fitzpatrick's model is marital-centered, making it quite limited in application.

Demographic Types

What we describe next is a category-approach to family types. In essence, the vast amount of family communication research relies heavily upon investigating one (or more) of the following family configurations: a) nuclear/biological, b) single parent, c) extended, d) stepfamily, e) gay-lesbian, f) cohabiting. Our goal in describing these six types is not to be exhaustive but rather to provide a snapshot of another confounding issue related to defining and interpreting the contemporary family. Each family type is interpreted, and representative family communication research using it is identified below.

The nuclear/biological family (Murdock, 1949) has been the family type that most in the United States have considered foundational for many years, and it is often the default type that people picture when the term *family* is invoked (Allen, et al., 2011). Only during the late 20th century did we see evidence of the decay of this family type. Nuclear families can be divided into either traditional or contemporary. Traditional nuclear families adhere to gendered communication patterns. The traditional nuclear family includes a husband/father working outside the home, a wife/mother working inside the home, and their biological children. Contemporary nuclear families include some variation on this, such as a stay-at-home father or dual-career couples with children. There are over 154,000 stay-at-home dads (up from 148,000 in 2005), overseeing nearly 290,000 children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). The numbers of dual-career couples also is increasing, constituting nearly 48% of all couples in the United States ("How Career Couples Stay Happy," 2012).

Nuclear families and the various biological relationships within them have comprised the bulk of the populations studied by family communication researchers. That is, scholars have investigated the biological relationships embedded within nuclear families, including relationships between siblings (Myers, 2011; Myers & Bryant, 2008), fathers and daughters (Weiner-Levy, 2011), mothers and daughters (Penington, 2012), and mothers and sons (Morman & Whitely, 2012). Some scholars have also studied the binuclear family (Sweeney, 2010), an arrangement occurring when divorced spouses/parents retain a relationship over two households.

A second family type investigated by family communication researchers is the single-parent family. These households include one adult who serves as the primary parent for at least one child and data from 2012 show that they comprise nearly 30% of all U.S. households (<http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s1337.pdf>). Up until the late 20th century, single parents were overwhelmingly women. Today's numbers, however, include a sizeable number of single-parent dads. Communication research investigating single mothers or fathers is very sparse. Some research (e.g., Toller & McBride, 2013) has examined communication in families after the death of one parent, however.

The extended family household, a third type, is a family residing with members beyond the nuclear family. This family type includes parents and children living together, along with other family members, most notably, grandparents. This arrangement continues to expand, given increasing life expectancies in the United States, and the need for children to serve as caregivers to their parents. In addition, as we noted earlier in this chapter, for various reasons adult children return to live with their families-of-origin. The arrival of these adult children may result in a version of an extended family. St. George (2010) noted that extended families are at their highest level in over 50 years. Culture is a mitigating factor in extended family configurations with Italian American, African American, and Latino

families replete with this family type (e.g., Romeo, 2011).

Like other family types, communication scholars have studied the extended family, although in limited ways. Prominently, grandparents and their various relationships have been investigated from a variety of perspectives (Dun, 2010; Miller-Day & Kam, 2010; Soliz, 2007; Turner, 2012). Although this body of research has been illuminating, family communication researchers have yet to embark upon studying behaviors much beyond this critical subunit of the family. To be sure, investigating perceptions of various members of an extended family has not received sufficient scholarly attention (see Fowler & Fisher, Chapter 13, this volume).

Stepfamilies, a fourth family type, include family members who are not the biological offspring of both the adults. In fact, this family type has been described as "the second time around" arrangement insofar as a reconstituted family has evolved from the merging of two families. With nearly 70% of all second marriages ending in divorce (Banschick, 2012), the escalating number of stepfamilies in the United States cannot be understated. Family communication researchers continue to be interested in studying stepfamilies. In fact, of all the family forms identified in this review, stepfamilies are among the most investigated (see Schrodt, Chapter 16, this volume). Speer, Giles, and Denes (2013), for instance, examined the accommodation practices in the stepparent-stepchild relationship. Koenig Kellas, LeClair-Underberg, and Normand (2008) studied the use of terminology in stepfamily relationships, discovering that formal, familiar, and familial language was employed to address members of the stepfamily. Stepchildren reported that address terms were used to indicate solidarity, separateness, or to deal with stepfamily life. Targeting online support group postings of childless stepmothers (stepmother/father household), Craig, Harvey-Knowles, and Johnson (2012) concluded that the stepmothers felt powerless in decision making and often felt disrespected by their spouses.

Another demographic family type is gay- and lesbian-headed families, which include same-sex parents raising at least one child. This family form, as we have discussed previously, has gained political and cultural prominence. Indeed, overall, surveys continue to show that a majority of the U.S. population supports the right for gay men and lesbians to marry. These nuptials necessarily impact the family type as a “gay-by” boom remains underway. Further, with same-sex couples being able to adopt children in nearly all 50 states, scholarly interest in the gay- and lesbian-headed family will likely continue.

Researchers in family communication began studying gay men and lesbians as parents in 1995 (West & Turner, 1995). Since that time, and despite calls to study this family form (Turner & West, 2003), little family scholarship has been undertaken in the communication discipline. Much of the communication research that exists has been undertaken by Suter and her colleagues (e.g., Bergen, Suter, & Daas, 2006; Koenig-Kellas & Suter, 2012; Suter & Daas, 2007; see Suter, Chapter 15, this volume, for additional research). In addition, Lanutti (2013) was the first family communication scholar to specifically address married and engaged same-sex couples and their privacy management practices. Interestingly, although West and Turner reported that accessibility was a challenge in their research, growing cultural support and family visibility will likely provide researchers more opportunity to investigate this family type.

The sixth family type embedded in family literature is cohabiting couples. These couples are not married but have chosen to reside together. Cohabitators occupy a large percentage of households in the United States, and it is clear that cohabitation rates have risen significantly. For instance, from 2004 to 2010, the number of heterosexual cohabitators increased from 4.9 million to 7.5 million (Jay, 2012; Krieder, 2010); the number of same-sex cohabitators increased from 595,000 to over 700,000 (“Tracking Unmarried Same-Sex Couples Using Social Maps,” 2012).

The increase in cohabiting couples has not been accompanied by an increase in family communication scholarship. In fact, this family configuration is perhaps the least-researched family type in the communication discipline. The limited studies available have addressed a number of different areas, including the effects of kissing (Floyd et al., 2009), the transition to parenthood (Bosch & Curran, 2011), and perceptions of power and its effects on conversational dominance (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005). Each of these studies has compared unmarried cohabitators with married couples. But, no family communication research has featured the cohabiting couple as the sole unit of analysis.

The preceding is meant to be representative and for the purpose of illuminating the relationship between extant family communication scholarship and family configurations. Indeed, no exhaustive category system for family has been universally accepted or applied. In fact, one could argue that such a system may not be necessary, given the complexity, diversity, and unpredictable evolution of family life. Nonetheless, what can be ascertained is a listing of multiple family types, each of which has been investigated and used in family communication research (including the scholarship found in this volume). However, it is worth acknowledging that, despite the dizzying array of types and approaches to the definition of family, images of a two-generational nuclear family are persistent for many people regardless of their culture or their own family’s configuration. For instance, Pyke (2000) found that adult Asian immigrants with aging parents drew on the construct of the nuclear family when thinking about their own families. Finally, it behooves researchers to acknowledge the relationship of family structures to governmental interpretations. That is, there is value in assessing data across family types and aligning them with data extracted from governmental sources such as the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) or Census Bureau. Such comparisons will be opportunistic for both researchers and those who digest complex information for public consumption (e.g., media, family policy centers, etc.).

Future Directions

As we consider the interpretation of family and all of its dimensions, several areas for future consideration emerge. Exploring these avenues requires us to think about both theoretical and practical issues. Toward that end, we wish to provide some directions for family communication scholars that will have both research and pragmatic value. Because this chapter underscores the conundrum related to defining family, we find it valuable to identify various ways to clarify the definition of family. We wish to see more writers address this critical area specifically, because to date, researchers vary greatly in how they integrate a definition of family into their research. Some scholarship clearly addresses the struggle over definition, while other research assumes or implies a definition without explicitly stating what it is. Therefore, we argue that family communication scholars and teachers should: a) embark upon a comprehensive undertaking to discuss the definition of family, b) strive to agree upon whether or not it is important to have a common interpretation of family, and c) work toward a more robust understanding of the influence of culture upon various views of family.

Our first contention highlights one way to address the challenges associated with defining family. We believe it is wise to delineate and investigate the numerous views of family. To this end, identifying convention programs, seminars, and preconferences with the overarching theme of "Defining Family" might be considered. The annual meeting of the National Communication Association, for instance, would be an appropriate venue to showcase the various viewpoints and dialogues related to this issue. Further, the *Journal of Family Communication (JFC)* could focus a special issue on the definition of family. Interestingly, while *JFC* has provided a number of special issues focusing on important areas in family communication since its inception, it has not devoted space to examine the parameters of the central concept that we study.

We further suggest that as a field, we should discuss and debate whether there is a need to establish a common definition (or typology) of family. Assembling family communication scholars, teachers, editors, media experts, and policy makers to address the need for a common or universal understanding of family is an important first step. A further course of action would be to delineate the consequences of creating a common interpretation. Whether agreement or disagreement exists, all possible implications and consequences need to be explored. For example, if a team of experts determines that such a common view is risky or unnecessary, then how does the family communication field proceed? Will researchers be required to provide the assumptions they have made about family in their scholarship?

It is likely that any or all of the preceding recommendations will necessitate reflection, deliberation, and time. Yet, one area for future investigation that is without dispute relates to the influence of culture and social class upon the definition of family. We alluded to the significance of this area earlier, yet, we wish to reiterate that before any definition of family can be debated, scholars should continue their quest to understand how culture informs this process. Although family communication scholars have made important efforts to understand the intersection between culture and communication (see Harris & González, this volume), more attention to culture's influence on interpreting family is warranted.

Conclusions

Our ideas of family are constantly changing and social issues compel us to continue renovating our definitions of family. Currently, our image of the family is affected by many changes, but these changes do not represent the disintegration of the American family. They are simply more reconstructions in the family's continual evolution. This evolution often provokes nostalgia. As Gillis (1996) observed, much changes in family life, but

one constant is that each generation looks back at past families as being more stable and authentic than current families.

Yet, even if the term *family* resists a simple unchanging definition, it still remains a critically important construct for laypeople, policy makers, and scholars. As laypeople, we recognize a need for historical roots, a communal present, and a way to connect to our future and the future beyond our own lifetimes. It seems likely that these needs find satisfaction within the family context. Jane Smiley (1996) eloquently speaks about how these needs all came together for her at her grandmother's funeral. In the midst of the eulogies for her grandmother, Smiley's 3-year-old son came to ask her a question. Smiley looked down at her young son in the context of the funeral and said,

"[h]e stood beside me, looking out at the group. I like to think that he was surveying his past, beginning to write his future, assembling the characters in his subconscious to live alongside the immediate, Freudian ones of Mom, Dad, and sisters, and I like to think that our voices, speaking of our grandmother entered him and lodged there, just at the boundary of conscious memory, ready to emerge when all of us are gone, and he is speaking to our unknown descendants" (p. 247).

As long as *family* means something this powerful to laypeople, scholars will continue to be interested in studying the communication processes that go on within it and construct it. In so doing, researchers will have to grapple with the meaning for family. Our responsibility may not be to find the one true definition, however, but rather to carefully define *family* for purposes of our study and clearly communicate that definition for our readers. Further, it behooves us to acknowledge the diversity of family in people's lived experiences and be sure that diversity is reflected in communication research.

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