



# Engaging Theories in Family Communication Multiple Perspectives

THIRD EDITION

Edited by Elizabeth A. Suter,  
Kory Floyd, Elizabeth A. Hintz,  
and Dawn O. Braithwaite



*“Engaging Theories in Family Communication: Multiple Perspectives (3rd ed.) contains comprehensive and insightful chapters covering theoretical perspectives on family communication research in a way that is accessible and applicable. This edition includes well-established theories and emerging conceptual and theoretical perspectives that are inclusive of a wide range of family types and experiences. It is an ideal resource for students studying family communication and for scholars seeking a primer in the field.”*

**Pamela J. Lannutti**, *Widener University, USA*

*“Covering consequential theories across the metatheoretical spectrum, this book provides an approachable and engaging overview of the diverse intellectual landscape of family communication. These chapters offer clear introductions to classic and new theories, serving as a valuable resource for new students and seasoned scholars alike.”*

**Andrew Ledbetter**, *Texas Christian University, USA*

*“This text provides a comprehensive overview of central theories of family communication while introducing essential viewpoints and paradigmatic traditions. Required reading for students who are interested in learning more about the field!”*

**Mackensie Minniear**, *University of Georgia, USA*



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# Engaging Theories in Family Communication

Bringing together the work of 60 contributors who represent both leading voices in family communication scholarship and an inspiring new generation of scholars shaping the field's future, this third edition is a comprehensive and accessible overview of the theories that form the foundation of the family communication field.

The book begins with an overview chapter including an updated empirical analysis of family communication research from 1990 to 2024. Twenty-seven theory chapters follow. Each chapter is dedicated to a single theory and follows a consistent structure, allowing readers to engage deeply with individual theories and draw comparisons between multiple theories. The third edition offers two new sections. (Meta)Theoretical Perspectives includes critical feminism, discourse dependence, systems theory, social constructionism, and natural selection. Looking Ahead features a multi-authored chapter that addresses emerging developments in the study of Black families, Indigenous perspectives, the Global South, Latina/o/x perspectives, and quantitative criticalism. This third edition features ten theories new to this edition, six of which were developed within the discipline of communication studies.

Ideal for advanced undergraduate and graduate students studying family communication, this text is also relevant for scholars and students of personal relationships, interpersonal communication, and family studies.

Theories from the second edition that are not included in this third edition can be downloaded from the book's website: [www.routledge.com/9781041013181](http://www.routledge.com/9781041013181).

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Edited by Elizabeth A. Suter,  
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Beth dedicates this book to her spouse Todd for being her life partner for over twenty years and walking alongside her on the journey of parenthood; to her daughters Lilibet and Claire for the joy and meaning they bring to her life; and to all her students at the University of Denver for their willingness to engage the complexities and contradictions of communication within and about family.

Kory dedicates this book to his husband Brian and his canine kiddos Buster and Champ for exemplifying unconditional love every day; to his new colleagues at Washington State University for welcoming him into a new department and academic discipline; and to his extended network of current and former students for demonstrating that family comes in many meaningful forms.

Elizabeth dedicates this book to her parents Steven and Cheryl Hintz, without whom her successes would not have been possible; to her husband Pádraig Lawlor for partnering with her to design a meaningful life and family; to our three fluffy cat children Keaton, Lionel, and Winnie; and to her doctoral advisees at the University of Connecticut (Lili, Karen, Zienab, Brandon, and Nazmul) for pushing her to think about family communication in new ways.

Dawn dedicates this book to the many collaborators, mentors, colleagues, and students who have shaped my thinking and scholarship about family and brought friendship and joy to my life; some as chosen family. I am especially grateful to Leslie Baxter, Sandra Petronio, Kathleen Galvin, and Paul Schrodt.



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**Jody Koenig Kellas** (Ph.D., University of Washington) is a Willa Cather Professor of communication studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where she researches how narratives and storytelling can improve people's communication, well-being, and lives. She received the Bernard J. Brommel Award for Outstanding Scholarship in Family Communication and the Kathleen Galvin Outstanding Teaching and Mentoring Award from the National Communication Association. Dr. Koenig Kellas has published over 70 articles, chapters, and books.

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**Erin Sahlstein Parcell** (Ph.D., University of Iowa) is professor of communication at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where she is also co-chair of the institutional review board for human subjects. She studies communication within and about family relationships and in particular military families and families affected by gun violence. Her research has earned grants and awards including the 2019 Waterhouse Family Institute Research Grant and the 2021 *Journal of Family Communication* Article of the Year.

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**Sandra Petronio** (Ph.D., University of Michigan) was director and founder of the Communication Privacy Management Center at IUPUI. She developed CPM theory and passed away in April 2024. Given her extensive development of CPM, much of the framing of her chapter remains in principle. As such, her chapter is dedicated to the legacy her scholarship, mentoring, thinking, and theoretical framework continue to provide about privacy and disclosure within the field of communication.

**Valerie Rubinsky** (Ph.D., Ohio University) is associate professor of communication at the University of Maine at Augusta. She is a communication and relationship scientist who studies memorable messages, sexual and relationship communication, and how individuals and families navigate gendered health experiences. Her work has appeared in over 40 peer-reviewed articles, dozens of book chapters, and two books.

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# Foreword

We have arrived at the third edition of *Engaging Theories in Family Communication: Multiple Perspectives*. I appreciate my colleagues and coeditors Elizabeth Suter, Kory Floyd, and Elizabeth Hintz for asking me to write this foreword for the third edition. I am so impressed with the returning and new chapters. I especially appreciate how Beth, Kory, and Elizabeth have reconceptualized the organization of the book, breaking out and expanding the section on metatheories, adding theories that help enlighten the experience of underrepresented and underserved families, and adding the final chapter on “Emerging Conceptual and Theoretical Perspectives.”

This foreword is a more personal reflection, as I have chosen this edition as my last, now that I’ve retired. My purpose is to briefly reflect on our developing approach to this book project, consider the present state of family communication theorizing, and address ways that we can contribute theory into the future.

In 2004, Todd Armstrong, then of Sage Publications, invited Leslie A. Baxter and me to create a book about interpersonal communication theories. We saw a greater need for a book focused on family communication theories, so we worked on the first edition for that project and turned to an interpersonal theories book (published in 2008). We knew the interdisciplinary study of family was going strong within allied disciplines such as psychology, sociology, social work, and family studies, and from fields of practice, such as social work, gerontology, and family therapy. The National Council on Family Relations (NCFR), founded in 1938, featured strong scholarship and practice and published important family journals (e.g., *Journal of Marriage and Family*). A few communication scholars were active in NCFR, and more were active in the interdisciplinary International Association for Relationship Research (IARR).

A watershed moment for family communication had come in 1999 when Gail Whitchurch and Fran Dickson were invited to author a chapter on family communication for the second edition of the interdisciplinary

*Handbook of Marriage & Family* (1999). Gail and Fran argued for the importance of family communication as a unique field of study. Anita Vangelisti (2004) had recently published the first edition of her comprehensive edited *Handbook of Family Communication* (1999), now in its third edition, and Lynn Turner and Richard West were working on their edited *Family Communication Sourcebook* (2006). Anita took an interdisciplinary perspective on family communication for her handbook, with many chapters authored by scholars outside the discipline of communication studies. As she and I have discussed, her choice was consistent with her strong interdisciplinary commitments and the fact that there were important family contexts and processes that did not yet have scholarship from our own discipline. The Vangelisti handbook was key to bringing our field of family communication to scholars in other disciplines, and we asked Anita to write the foreword of our first edition.

As we were planning for our book, Leslie and I concluded that for family communication to continue to grow and to make an important contribution to the interdisciplinary study of family, we needed to focus on seeking scholars and scholarship based in our field of family communication. Our goal was to assess and grow theory-based research that we believed would feed research, teaching, and professionals working with families.

### **The Study of Paradigms and Theory Guidance**

To start, we needed a lay of the land, and we created a survey of all the empirical studies coming out of family communication by communication scholars (by “empirical,” I am referring to research based in both qualitative and quantitative data and observations). We so appreciate our colleagues who have worked on that study for all three editions. Frankly, as we started this project, Leslie and I were a bit concerned about whether we would be able to identify enough family theories to make our project viable. We also had a strong commitment to include theories from across postpositivist, interpretive, and critical paradigms (read about the three paradigms in Chapter 1). We knew this would be a challenge at the time as most research in family communication came from scholars working in the postpositivist paradigm. We valued this work (and Leslie’s early research was in the postpositivist/quantitative tradition, moving into interpretive and critical, whereas my work was interpretive/qualitative). At that time, publishing interpretive work was quite challenging. My colleagues and I titled a later essay with a quote we received from a journal reviewer: “I need numbers before I will buy it” (Braithwaite et al., 2014).

Leslie and I were very committed to advancing both interpretive and critical research and theorizing. Identifying critical family communication theory was even more challenging as there was little critical work in family

or interpersonal communication at the time. We also predicted there would be some resistance, especially from those engaging traditional social science research perspectives. We hosted a convention panel on the state of theory and research in 2006. There was certainly some interest and excitement when we argued for critical scholarship, as well as some deep resistance (and some yelling) from a few in attendance. Throughout the years, I have been so pleased to see the growth of both interpretive and critical theory and research and note that family communication opened its doors more quickly than did interpersonal communication. We also hoped to encourage scholars representing and studying diverse family types into family communication (Galvin & Braithwaite, 2014). As we suspected, at first it was more challenging to locate theories guiding interpretive and especially critical work. Some of the theories we chose for the first edition were more aspirational; some would catch on, and others would be replaced by new theories in subsequent editions.

By the second edition and especially in this third edition, there is greater range and depth in theorizing, especially in critical scholarship. I believe that the groundbreaking “#CommunicationSoWhite” essay (Chakravartty et al., 2018) and others arguing for diversity in scholars, theories, and scholarship (e.g., Cardwell, 2023; Moore, 2017; Suter 2016), along with this theory volume, encouraged this development.

### **Encouraging Theory Driven Research**

Why do we place so much emphasis on family communication theory? In short, as my co-editors and I discuss in Chapter 1, we believe that research is stronger and more meaningful when based in theory and/or committed to growing theory. I am perhaps most pleased to learn from the updated data reported in Chapter 1 that the number of studies has increased and the percentage of studies that are theory-based has grown from 42.9% in the first edition to 79.3% when looking across all studies. I am also pleased to see more diversity in paradigmatic choices. When we started this project, for example, 82.1% of the research was postpositivist, and today that percentage is 59.3% when looking across the years. One of our goals from the start of the first edition was to encourage paradigmatic breadth, as we believed (and still do) that it makes the field of family communication stronger and more applicable.

Another positive development I have noted over the years is that theory has taken an increasingly important role in research projects. We initially adopted a very loose definition of what a theory-based study was; if researchers mentioned a theory, we counted that study as theory-based. I thought about it as “If the author waved the hot dog over the fire of theory, we counted it” (Braithwaite et al., 2022). My sense is that as

scholars have been developing theories that are tied specifically to driving and understanding family communication, this has created better tools to work with. Theory is playing a more central role in helping scholars conceive, argue for, carry out, and interpret research findings. This reflects maturity in family communication to which many have contributed. In addition, I am pleased to witness the role our book has had in any growth over the years. Another important development for this third edition is that Drs. Suter, Floyd, and Hintz counted studies that cross paradigmatic lines, for example, interpretive/critical or postpositive/interpretive (see Chapter 1). I applaud the efforts of scholars taking this approach to their research when it fits their goals. I am certain these numbers will continue to grow.

### **Moving into the Future**

Although we see important growth in family communication theory, there is of course work to do. I will close this foreword with some thoughts about continuing theories and theorizing, interdisciplinary contributions, translational work, and end this foreword with some expressions of appreciation.

#### *Continuing Theories and Theorizing*

First, it should be no surprise that I encourage scholars to continue to develop, evaluate, and use theory. It is good news that the editors of this book had to make hard decisions about which theories to include in the new edition (returning and new chapters) and those to archive.

Developing theories is not easy. If you want to get a sense of what theory development entails, read the 2004 issue of the *Journal of Family Communication*, in which Leslie Baxter, Mary Anne Fitzpatrick, Sandra Petronio, and Edna Rogers each told the story of how they began and grew their theories (see Braithwaite, 2004). It takes hard and sustained effort, energy, creativity, doggedness, patience, courage, as well as developing a thick skin when critiques are posed or one perceives their theory is being misapplied. All the theorists in this volume have done research to test, challenge, and refine their own theories and most, if not all, have worked with collaborators.

Theorizing does not happen solely from one study or in one essay; it takes sustained work. In contrast, I have seen scholars struggle to know when they “have” a theory even after working for a long time. As you might imagine, the editors of this book have had discussions over when we believe a theory exists and is ready to be included in the book. These are healthy and instructive conversations. I also have heard a few newer scholars say they were expected to develop a theory in their doctoral dissertation

or pre-tenure. I am not saying this cannot be done, but I am concerned about additional pressure on newer scholars. I am also concerned about the erroneous message this might send about the process of theory development. In the end, for every theorist, the day comes when they must muster the courage to step out and claim they have a theory. One cannot hold onto a theory forever; at their best, theories are not private possessions.

At the 2002 National Communication Association conference, I planned a panel on theory development. As part of that event, we recorded a conversation with Leslie Baxter, Sandra Petronio, and Edna Rogers. I am sharing two comments from that discussion I believe you will find insightful (published in Braithwaite, 2004):

**Baxter:** I do not mean to pay disrespect to any of us, but we don't own our theories. I think the theories are ideas, and ideas are communally owned. So, in terms of whether there is a right or a wrong take on a theory, I resist that. Can someone misread a theory? You bet that can happen. But to me that's not a question of ownership, that is a question of somebody interpreting the words differently and people argue about this all the time. It strikes me that a good theory is open for that kind of ambiguity.

**Petronio:** I would agree, in fact, I would encourage people to do that because then I can learn. Because my favorite role is being a student. I mean, I just love to see how things get twisted and turned in different ways and then it is so amazing. I look at papers that people have given me that use the theory, and I think "Wow this is so great because they have a different way of understanding things." And criticism is excellent. One theorist wrote that if you don't have a theory, you don't really have any way to have controversy. And if you don't have controversy, you don't have movement forward, there is no growth. So, take it, run with it. I consider my theory a gift and it's yours.

It is important to stress that not every scholar will develop a theory or needs to. Imagine how many half-baked theories (and likely nontheories) we would have if this were the expectation. I have not created a theory myself. I did not feel that call and believe there are other ways to contribute to theory.

Finally, theories are not static, and theorizing is an evolutionary process that takes place at a certain historical time and cultural milieu. It is challenging and joyful work. Theory development is never done and theories that persist will be carried into the future and developed by students and collaborators of the original theorists, and those who have been using the theory. There will be times when a theory needs to be updated or perhaps retired. One of the reasons we continue with this theory book

project is that it helps us track our understanding of family communication and shine a light on both challenges and positive aspects of family life over time.

### *Interdisciplinary Contributions*

Second, an ongoing goal has been to help those outside of our field find and use our work. There are certainly family communication scholars who have been doing this very successfully over the years. As an example, in that 2004 special issue on family communication theory (Braithwaite, 2004), we featured essays by Leslie Baxter (relational dialectics theory), Mary Ann Fitzpatrick (family communication patterns theory), Edna Rogers (relational communication theory), and Sandra Petronio (communication privacy management theory). The work of these pioneering theorists has been of interest beyond our disciplinary borders for many years and we are certainly seeing ongoing visibility for their work and the work on newer theories.

Although I appreciate the progress on interdisciplinary impact, it is slower than I would hope. Perhaps it is my own tendency toward impatience (which sometimes may be a strength), but I am anxious for more interdisciplinary scholars to regularly use and cite our work. I suspect that some members of our field can be self-effacing or timid at times, certainly busy with day-to-day demands, and/or perhaps unconvinced of the importance of having our theory and scholarship finding its way beyond our disciplinary borders. Sometimes our own universities provide constraints when they encourage interdisciplinary work and connections and at the same time discourage publishing outside of our own discipline, especially when working toward promotion and tenure. I believe we can each play a role in building greater impact on interdisciplinary family scholarship, and I appreciate those doing this kind of work at their own appropriate career stage.

There certainly are positive interdisciplinary developments happening. For instance, we reached out to NCFR in 2013 to encourage greater inclusion of family communication scholars and scholarship. As we suspected, there was limited familiarity with our field (and in some cases no familiarity at all). We were pleased to find NCFR interested in growing connections. They suggested starting a family communication interest group and Erin Sahlstein Parcell took the lead, followed by Tara McManus, and now Weimiao Zhou. The interest group has attracted scholars from our field, of course, and other NCFR members. The leadership of the Family Communication Division at NCA has encouraged our members to make connections outside of our field, join NCFR, and share our work on their social media platforms.

The most important advancement as a field has come from family communication scholars themselves, who are doing innovative, high-quality research and theory development. More of our scholars are publishing in high-impact interdisciplinary journals and books and are increasingly serving as reviewers and members of editorial boards for interdisciplinary outlets. Movement forward has come with increased opportunities to publish about our field. For example, Kathleen Galvin and I were invited to author an article on family communication in the *Journal of Family Theory and Review* (2014). Elizabeth Suter and I had a chapter proposal accepted for the interdisciplinary *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies* volume (2022). In both cases we had to stress to editors that family communication was a *field of study* rather than a single theory. It was challenging to try and represent our field in an essay-length chapter, but we were glad to have the opportunity to do so. Other family communication scholars have contributed essays about their theory to the *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, to special issues of journals, and to edited books. All these efforts raise the visibility of our field.

Elizabeth Suter and I argued that we are at a positive invitational moment to connect others with family communication (Braithwaite & Suter, 2022). We can all help advance our field by continuing and increasing publication in interdisciplinary journals and books. I also encourage us to join NCFR and IARR, along with other interdisciplinary associations that fit our work. There are other ways to make a difference—for instance, by reaching out to make personal connections with family scholars outside our field. This includes working on interdisciplinary research teams on campus and beyond and sharing our work at interdisciplinary conferences when possible. Each of us can find our own ways to do this. I have concentrated on sharing research and theory (my own and by other family communication scholars) with interdisciplinary colleagues. When I see an article in which I believe family communication theory and research would be of benefit, I often send the authors a short positive note and attach citations and manuscripts they might find useful. We can also invite interdisciplinary family scholars to visit our campuses and speak.

Sure, at times, nothing may appear to come from these efforts, or we may never see it firsthand. I have received positive responses from those who appreciated the quality of our theories and research, seen an uptick in citations, and witnessed some interdisciplinary scholars become ambassadors for our work. Outreach can take some time and effort, however, I cannot help but look for positive benefits for us individually and as a field. In my own experience, here in my retirement years, I am part of a group of interdisciplinary and international stepfamily scholars and therapists who meet regularly, collaborate, and look for opportunities to assist stepfamilies.

These are relationships we started building many years ago and the group is growing. Putting ourselves out there can be daunting at times, and of course, we need to find what works for us.

### *Translational Work*

One of the most exciting developments in recent years is to see more family communication scholars undertaking community-based research and taking their knowledge out to professionals and family members. One benefit I have found is that taking our theory and research into the public eye is one way to test how well we have produced findings and theories that can be understood and applied by professionals working with families and by family members themselves.

There are many ways to take translational steps, including presenting workshops for professionals or family members, building and testing applied strategies into research projects, working with media as an expert, giving talks at other universities or community organizations, taking part in podcasts, authoring opinion pieces, and writing blogs. I am so pleased to see more family communication scholars taking these kinds of translational steps and incorporating this work into the experience of their students. Most of us find undertaking translational work more possible at different times. Here in retirement, I have more time to write a blog (“Communication Matters” for *Psychology Today*), to present workshops, and appear on podcasts, for example. I understand that not all scholars are interested in and/or are good at translational writing and speaking. Each of us must do what best fits our talents, interests, and timing.

### **In Appreciation**

I have nothing but awe and praise for the central role my research partner and friend Leslie Baxter has played in theory development and research via her relational dialectics theory and this theory book project. Leslie’s brilliance and vision were so important to the first edition of this book, and although she retired before the second edition, her inspiration and scholarship infuse several chapters in the current edition. I made many working trips to Leslie’s home in Iowa City over the years, and her daughter Emma was patient as mom and Auntie Dawn worked late into the night and while watching her do gymnastics and other activities. I am grateful to my own mentors, colleagues, and students. I miss Sandra Petronio, Kathleen Galvin, and Chad McBride more than I can express.

I am incredibly grateful to be working with such amazing co-editors on this third edition. All three are top scholars in our field and well-poised to continue to lead this project into the future. We all owe a debt of gratitude

to the scholars who have worked on theories and contributed chapters across all three editions. Your work has made the field strong, growing, and full of promise.

—Dawn O. Braithwaite

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# Preface

We are delighted to present this third edition of *Engaging Theories in Family Communication: Multiple Perspectives*. Written primarily for advanced undergraduate and graduate students, the purpose of this book is to highlight a collection of theories, (meta)theoretical perspectives, emerging conceptual and theoretical developments, and ongoing conversations to guide family communication research. This book also serves as a foundational resource for libraries and researchers.

For this new edition, we added Elizabeth A. Hintz, University of Connecticut, to our editorial board. Elizabeth A. Suter, University of Denver; Kory Floyd, Washington State University; and Dawn O. Braithwaite, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, remained on the team for this third edition with Dawn moving to fourth author given her retirement and Elizabeth Suter taking her place as first author.

Informed by an empirical study of published family communication research from 1990–2024, we also made several changes to both the organization and content of this newest edition. We direct readers to our introduction for details on the process of conducting and the findings of our study. We are grateful to University of Connecticut graduate students Lili Romann and Karen Shalev for assisting Kory Floyd with this challenging study.

In the end, we added two new sections to this volume for a total of three sections. The first section orients the reader to five overarching (*Meta*) *Theoretical Perspectives in Family Communication Research*, namely critical feminism, discourse dependence, systems, social constructionism, and natural selection. The second section presents a diverse set of 22 *Theoretical Perspectives in Family Communication Research*, nine of which are new to the third edition, and five “homegrown” within the discipline of communication studies. The third section ends the volume by *Looking Ahead* by presenting a final multisectioned, multi-authored chapter addressing new

developments related to the study of Black families, Indigenous perspectives, the Global South, Latina/o/x perspectives, and quantitative criticalism.

We express our deepest appreciation to the 56 contributors to this volume. Quite simply, there is no book without your work. Together, these authors represent both leading voices in family communication scholarship and an inspiring new generation of scholars whose theoretical and conceptual contributions are shaping the field's future. Your collective work reflects the ongoing growth, vitality, and promise of family communication studies, and we are honored to share it. We eagerly look forward to what you will create next.

We are deeply grateful to Routledge for its continued and generous support of this project. In particular, we extend our sincere thanks to Felisa Salvago-Keyes, editor at Routledge, and Zoya Gayle, editorial assistant, whose guidance, care, and commitment were instrumental throughout the process. We also offer our heartfelt appreciation to Leslie A. Baxter for her foundational contributions to the first edition of this volume and her enduring support and encouragement for the second and third editions.

Finally, this book project also reflects and contributes to our own understanding of family communication. Between us, we represent many types of family experiences at different points in our lives: adoptive, stepfamily, multiethnic/racial, LGBTQ+, childfree, and voluntary kin—all created, enacted, and changed in interaction. We gained insights into our own family experiences as we read these chapters, and we trust you will as well.

—Elizabeth A. Suter, Kory Floyd, Elizabeth A. Hintz,  
and Dawn O. Braithwaite



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# 1 Introduction

## The Landscape of Paradigm and Theory in Family Communication Research

*Elizabeth A. Suter, Kory Floyd,  
Elizabeth A. Hintz, Dawn O. Braithwaite,  
Lili Romann, and Karen Shalev*

Family is a centerpiece of the human experience. Whether consuming news and social media; framing diverse viewpoints springing from governmental, educational, and religious organizations; experiencing influences from local, national, and international communities; or interacting with members of our own families, we experience both consensus and disagreement about who is regarded as family, what we expect from families, and how we believe people should communicate in families. The topic of family is always complex, ever-changing, and often contested (Soliz & Colaner, 2020).

As in the first two editions, our goal for this third edition of *Engaging Theories in Family Communication: Multiple Perspectives* is to provide a comprehensive resource for researchers, students, instructors, and those working with families who want to understand the central role of communication in the lives of family members. Rather than offer readers a summary of research findings by context or topic, as one would find in a handbook (e.g., Vangelisti, 2021), we provide an overview and concise discussion of important theories that can guide both the understanding and the study of family communication. We recognize that theories can seem abstract and complex at times, yet we see them as practical and useful tools for understanding and addressing the challenges contemporary families face. Thinking about theories as useful tools, we designed this book as a toolbox to help you understand and study family communication from a variety of perspectives and approaches. In this opening chapter, we provide a map of the landscape of family communication research and theory by presenting an overview of family communication research from 1990 to 2024 and offering implications for family communication research.

## 2 *Engaging Theories in Family Communication*

### **Roots of Family Communication**

Although families have always been a central part of human history and investigated across many disciplines, the study of family in the communication discipline is relatively young. In fact, several senior authors in the current or earlier editions of this book were instrumental in getting the field of family communication started and growing over the last 45 years. To gain an understanding and appreciation for the state of family communication theory, we (a) describe the roots of the family communication field, (b) explain how we are defining family communication, (c) present the results of a study that outlines the theoretical and paradigmatic commitments of family communication research, and (d) describe our process of choosing the theories included in this book.

One observation we want to stress about the study of communication is that it has always been based on practical goals and concerns. With roots in ancient Greece and Rome, and likely starting earlier in Africa and China, the study of communication started by helping people design effective arguments (Ehninger, 1968). As the 20th century began, college courses in rhetoric, public speaking, and performance of literature were found most often in English or theater departments under the title of “speech.” In 1914, a group of speech professors broke off from English and formed their own professional association, which grew into the present-day National Communication Association (Braithwaite et al., 2022a; Cohen, 1994). Over the first half of the 20th century, as speech departments (today most often called Communication or Communication Studies) were created in universities, they included faculty members who took two very different approaches to the study of communication. Those favoring what was called the Cornell School studied communication from a humanities (rhetoric) perspective. Beginning in the mid-20th century, those favoring the Midwestern School studied communication as a social science (Pearce & Foss, 1990).

One can see evidence of the practical goal of understanding and improving the human condition throughout the study of communication. Following World War II, scholars were focusing on a variety of topics to address challenges and atrocities coming out of that time, including small group discussion as a way of promoting democracy; media and transmission of information; argumentation and debate; and persuasion. What these early scholars had in common was that they focused largely on message transmission, especially the clarity and effectiveness of messages. In the 1950s and 1960s, some scholars who took a social scientific approach to their research began to move into speech departments from psychology, sociology, and political science, bringing with them quantitative and experimental research methods (to explore the development of

the communication discipline, see Cohen, 1994; Gehrke & Keith, 2015; Pearce & Foss, 1990).

Important cultural developments in the 1960s and 1970s influenced teachers and scholars in universities, such as civil rights, the women's movement, and growth of the counterculture, along with scientific and technological developments that led to important transformations in personal and family relationships. Research and courses in interpersonal communication boomed at this time, and these social scientists joined rhetoricians in departments of speech that later changed their names to "communication" to reflect the breadth of the discipline and what was studied and taught (to explore the development of the interpersonal communication field, see Braithwaite, 2014; Knapp & Daly, 2011).

### *Evolution of the Study of Family Communication*

Studying families had long been a part of a number of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, education, political science, counseling, gerontology, human development, and family studies. Similarly, social science scholars in the communication discipline showed interest in families; for example, some interpersonal communication scholars studied married couples or parents and children, some media scholars studied the effects of television on children, and some organizational communication scholars studied work-life barriers for women. The field of family communication began as an offshoot of interpersonal communication and an interest in therapy and well-being in family systems (e.g., Watzlawick et al., 1967; for a fuller discussion of the development of family communication, see Braithwaite & Suter, 2022; Galvin & Braithwaite, 2014).

Kathleen Galvin and Bernard Brommel published the first family communication textbook, *Family Communication: Cohesion and Change*, in 1982. They drew on literature from psychology, sociology, and counseling, as there were limited resources in the communication discipline. Around the same time, interpersonal communication scholars were starting to develop research and theory centered on family interaction patterns (e.g., Rogers & Farce, 1975), marital types (e.g., Fitzpatrick, 1987), and conflict and decision-making (e.g., Sillars & Kalbfleisch, 1988). Starting in the mid-1980s, family communication classes began appearing on college campuses, and research programs were growing. Family communication became a full division in the National Communication Association in 1989. One of the most significant developments to move the new field forward was the launch of the *Journal of Family Communication* by inaugural editor Thomas Socha in 2001 (see Socha, 2026).

Dawn O. Braithwaite and Leslie Baxter published the first edition of the present book in 2006, starting with 20 theories, half of which originated in

#### 4 *Engaging Theories in Family Communication*

the communication discipline and half of which came from allied disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, and family studies. Around the same time, family communication scholars began to study diverse family forms, such as multiethnic-racial, LGBTQIA+, single-parent, adoptive, and stepfamilies (see Braithwaite & Schrodt, 2013; Floyd & Morman, 2014; Soliz et al., 2009; Suter, 2014a, b). Since the first edition of this book was published, we have seen a significant increase in the breadth of theories, the use of qualitative/interpretive methods, and engagement with a critical lens on family interaction. As a touchstone, Galvin and Brommel's original family communication text is now in its 11th edition (Braithwaite et al., 2025), joined by an increasing number of other texts over the years (e.g., Brewer & Faulkner, 2025; Dorrance Hall & Scharp, 2021; Segrin & Flora, 2026; Turner & West, 2014), many in multiple editions. There have been many significant advances in family communication over its relatively brief history, and in many ways, we believe the field is just hitting its stride.

#### **Defining Family Communication**

Before we delve further into family communication theory, we should clarify how we are defining a family. Family communication scholars focus largely on communication as a symbolic process that humans use to create meaning. Stewart (1999) eloquently described this view of communication:

Communication is the way humans build our reality. Human worlds are not made up of objects but of people's responses to objects, or their meanings. And these meanings are negotiated in communication. Try not to think of communication as simply a way to share ideas, because it's much more than that. It's the process humans use to define reality itself.

(p. 25)

Thinking about family communication in this way, communication is much more than transmitting a message from one person to others. Rather we are interested in how people co-create and negotiate meanings, identity, and relationships in social interaction; that is, how we constitute ourselves and our family relationships (see Baxter, 2014; Galvin & Braithwaite, 2014). From a family communication perspective, we view communication not just as one aspect of a family or how family members send and receive messages, but as the central process by which families are literally *talked into being*—that is, how families are co-constructed, negotiated, and legitimated in discourse.

For family communication scholars, practitioners, and for family members themselves, conceptualizing families as co-constructed in communication

focuses our attention on who we regard as family and what it means to be a family. Whereas families may be formed by biological and/or legal ties, they can also be formed by communicatively negotiated bonds of affection, interdependence, history, and long-term commitment. Voluntary or chosen families, those people we regard as family who are not related to us through biology or legal ties, are illustrative (Braithwaite et al., 2010). Thinking about discourse dependence and the role of communication in co-constructing families, we share Braithwaite et al.'s (2025) definition of family as “networks of people who share their lives over long periods of time bound by marriage, blood, or commitment, legal or otherwise, who consider themselves as family and who share a significant history and anticipated future functioning as a family” (p. 9). This definition highlights the central role of communication in forming, maintaining, changing, and even ending families.

### **Paradigms of Family Communication**

As this is a book dedicated to family communication theory, we should start by asking, what is the work that theories do? At its most general level, a communication theory is a set of statements that renders intelligible some communication phenomenon or process (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). What counts as a theory, what a theory is supposed to do, and how to evaluate a theory are embedded in broader philosophical systems of inquiry, or *paradigms*, about reality and how one produces knowledge claims. To understand the concept of theory, then, we believe it is important to provide a brief backdrop of the primary discourses (intellectual traditions) present in the family communication literature. These paradigmatic backdrops are not unique to the family communication domain, and they give us a way to organize and think about the ways scholars approach research and theory.

For our purposes, a discourse is a linguistic system of distinctions and the values enacted in those distinctions (Deetz, 2001). Discourses are points of view that help us to understand and appreciate different approaches to asking questions about family communication, choosing research methods to answer our questions, and providing the criteria by which to evaluate research findings and conclusions (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). Each discourse—each paradigm—brings with it a different set of assumptions about the nature of truth and reality, the relationship between the researcher and the phenomenon under investigation, the role of values in theory and research, and how best to communicate research findings. We believe it is unhelpful to argue about which paradigm is correct or superior; rather, the issue is to understand and appreciate the intellectual resources embedded in a given paradigm. It is important to be able to identify the stock

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arguments, often implicit and unstated, that provide warrants for designing research questions and research methods to guide a given study. There are a number of excellent frameworks of different paradigms, many providing a greater degree of nuance (see Deetz, 2001; Droser, 2017).

From the first edition of this book, we chose to divide research into three basic paradigms to organize our thinking about family communication research and theory first identified by Bochner (1985): postpositivist, interpretive, and critical. From the first edition we organized studies into these three paradigms, as we believe this provides the most widespread understanding of the broad paradigmatic categories to guide research. We do understand that there are benefits to more nuanced perspectives that can help understand scholarly work (e.g., Cardwell, 2025). For our purposes, we continue to organize our understanding of research in this broad way. Below, we discuss each of these paradigms and provide an example of how scholars might use them to understand family communication.

*Researchers adopting a postpositivist perspective* take a scientific approach to research, sometimes called the “logical-empirical tradition” and often relying on quantitative analyses using surveys or experiments. The goal of postpositivist scholars is to produce generalizable, cause-effect explanations about how variables are interdependent in an objective world. Researchers seek causal explanations of the social world via webs of variables, some of which function as independent variables by causing outcomes or effects on other variables known as dependent variables. Researchers committed to the discourse of postpositivism will identify a theory and testable hypotheses relevant to the phenomenon they wish to explain and predict. Theories in this paradigm consist of law-like statements that apply across situations and describe how variables relate, causally or functionally. In its idealized form, the researcher’s task is to deduce testable hypotheses from the theory.

Researchers situating their work in the postpositivist paradigm might be interested in studying, for example, how the communication norms in one’s family of origin affect the development of communication norms in one’s family of procreation. In this tradition, research begins with a theory, such as a theory of intergenerational family transmission, in which predictable patterns among key variables are posited. From this theory, the researcher would derive testable hypotheses relevant to the transmission of communication norms. The researcher would determine whether the hypotheses were supported by the observations coming from data, and thus whether the theory of intergenerational family transmission gained support. For the postpositivist, a good theory is one that is accurate (in agreement with observations), testable (capable of being both verified and falsified), logically consistent, parsimonious (appropriately simple), appropriate in scope, and useful for generating predictions and explanations about family communication.

*Researchers adopting an interpretive perspective* are committed to a rich and detailed understanding of how particular social practices are negotiated and maintained in family communication. Interpretive researchers value the “actors’ point of view”—the perspectives and language choices of the persons being studied. These scholars rely on qualitative analyses from research methods such as interviews, focus groups, participant diaries or writing, and observation (ethnography). Theories valued by interpretive researchers are focused on meanings and meaning-making and look for common patterns of meaning among members of a particular group or context being studied. These researchers seek to understand how realities are produced and maintained through the everyday practices of people and families. Interpretive theories are sensitizing devices or guides to getting started and are put into conversation with locally emergent meanings. The goal is not to test the theory in a specific situation, but rather to engage the theory in conversation with the researcher’s emergent observations and interpretations that flow from the participants’ experiences. From the interpretive perspective, a theory is a heuristic device, useful in sensitizing a researcher; it is a conversational partner, open to transformation when put into play with the point of view of the perspectives of the participants and the interpretations of the researcher.

Returning to our example of the intergenerational transmission of communication norms, the interpretive researcher would likely adopt an inductive approach by asking family members to describe, in their own terms, which communication norms characterized their family of origin and their family of procreation. The interpretive researcher may be interested in family members’ perceptions of how communication in the family of origin is related to how they currently communicate in their own family. The interpretive researcher would not test hypotheses but would instead start with a theory explaining how social realities are reproduced and then use this theory as a sensitizing device to develop research questions and preliminary interview questions or make findings intelligible at the analysis stage of the study. In the end, the researcher would conclude that the theory was more or less useful in illuminating family members’ experiences.

Alternatively, an interpretive researcher might prefer to operate entirely inductively, developing a theory from the “bottom up” based on observations, which is referred to as “grounded-theory construction” (Charmaz, 2024). Whether the theory exists before the study or is developed in the course of the research, a good interpretive theory is heuristic and enlightens the meanings and meaning-making processes of the persons or groups being studied. This is more than describing what is there; it also involves an interpretation that renders that description intelligible or understandable. This is different from the goals of prediction and explanation of

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postpositivist theories; however, like postpositivist theory, interpretive theory should be logically consistent and parsimonious.

*Researchers adopting a critical perspective* view the family as a social/historical creation in which various power struggles take place and serve some interests more fully than others. A critical researcher would rely on a theory of institutional or ideological power as an analytic guide to understand and explain how some voices become marginalized or silenced and other voices become dominant. Critical scholars focus on the role of various societal structures and ideologies—such as the ideology of individualism or the ideology of patriarchy—in personal identity and often focus on groups such as women, people of color, and nonelite social groups, such as LGBTQIA+ families. A goal of emancipation or enlightenment and an activist agenda of social change drive the work of the critical scholar. The critical scholar's research methods may look much like those of the interpretive scholar, such as using interviews or observations via ethnography. Their goals are different however. Whereas the interpretive scholar seeks to identify patterns or consensus, the critical scholar rejects that goal and focuses on contradictions, dissension, or inequities, finding meaning in differences.

Returning to the intergenerational transmission example, the critical researcher would be interested in determining whose expectations or norms in the family were legitimated and whose were silenced or delegitimated. The researcher's goal would be to highlight perspectives and norms that were silenced in the power-filled dynamics of family life. A critical theory is evaluated by its capacity to help researchers to uncover marginalized voices and foster social justice, thereby emancipating disempowered groups from oppressive social structures or ideologies.

If we are to understand and evaluate the value of research, we must first understand the foundation on which it is built. What is challenging for those who read and use research is that scholars rarely articulate their paradigmatic commitments explicitly when they report their research findings. These philosophical alignments often float at a latent level, in between the lines of a researcher's writing. The sophisticated reader must know how to locate and recognize a researcher's choices to infer the paradigmatic commitments in a given study, and this ability comes only with experience. The more people read research, the more they will understand how to identify the paradigm engaged in a given study. Why is that important? For the reader, it is useful to know what the researcher values about theory and research and how theory should be employed and evaluated. For researchers, it is important that they design studies with an eye toward these broader paradigmatic commitments to be able to approach their work consistently and rigorously and to understand the criteria by which a study should be evaluated.

In this book, we asked the authors to make their choices regarding intellectual traditions explicit. We encourage you to pay attention to how authors developed or extended the distinctions between different paradigms, how