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None of the family forms described in this volume meets the ideological "gold standard" of the nuclear family, and in this sense they all represent a remaking of the family in profound ways.

Leslie A. Baxter (Ph.D., University of Oregon) is Collegiate Fellow and Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Iowa. She received the 2007 Bernard J. Brommel Award for outstanding scholarship in family communication from the National Communication Association (NCA) as well as the 2011 Family Communication Division Outstanding Book Award, among others. In 2008 she was given NCA's highest honor by being named an NCA Distinguished Scholar.
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REMAKING
“FAMILY”
COMMUNICATIVELY
The Lifespan Communication series
is part of the Peter Lang Media and Communication list.
Every volume is peer reviewed and meets
the highest quality standards for content and production.
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Remaking "Family" Communicatively represents a significant development in the history of ideas about family communication. Since the early days of family communication studies in the 1980s, family communication scholars have labored to develop inclusive ways to think about and conceptualize “families.” Most writers of family communication textbooks, for example, have created definitions of “family” using inclusive language and often lengthy prose to create a big tent. Similarly, those who follow the family communication research literature have also seen sincere efforts towards inclusivity, but, to date, mostly have been reading about communication in human systems populated by people cast in roles using familiar historic language. This volume offers a clarion call to all those who study, teach, and live family communication: “families” are discursively dynamic and evolve. That is, borrowing a line from an old TV commercial, today’s families both are, and are not, like our “fathers’” Oldsmobiles. Professor Leslie Baxter and her authors collectively paint a wonderful portrait of the current state of conceptualizing the “family” in “family” communication that not only will inform contemporary societal discursive struggles with meanings of familial terms, but will become a much-cited work in the future.

Like this volume, the book series, *Lifespan Communication: Children, Families and Aging*, invites communication scholars to view communication through a panoramic lens—from first words to final conversations—a comprehensive communication
vista that brings children, adolescents, adults, and those in later life as well as lifespan groups such as the family into focus. By viewing communication panoramically it is also my hope that communication scholars and educators will incorporate into their work the widely accepted idea that communication develops, that is, it has a starting point and a developmental arc; changing as we change over time. And further, that developmental communication arcs are historically contextualized. As infants we begin our communication education in unique historical contexts that shape our early communication learning as well as the foundations of our communication values. Children born in 2014, for example, will begin their communication learning in a time where humans are seeking to remake themselves to fit a rapidly changing and increasingly digitally mediated landscape. Of course adults caring for children—circa-2014—who, following this volume, could have been born anytime between the 1930’s to the late 1990’s—have experienced vastly different developmental communication arcs, but yet must discursively span the generations, pass along their communication knowledge and values, as well as teach children how to communicate effectively within the current historical context. Historically contextualized lifespan thinking also raises important new questions such as what is to be passed along from one generation to the next as “timeless” communication knowledge and practices? Or in contemporary digital parlance, what is to become memetic, that is, analogous to genetic information, what survives to become the communication inheritance of future generations?

It is my hope that Remaking “Family” Communicatively, and all of the books published in the Lifespan Communication: Children, Families, and Aging series will offer the communication field new understandings and deeper appreciation of the complexities of all forms of communication as it develops across the lifespan as well as raise important questions about communication for current and future generations to study.

—Thomas J. Socha
The goal … should be to recognize the variety within which households can come—the diversity of domestic relations, the inventiveness of human connection, and not the singling out of one form of relation … over all others.

—J. Jack Halberstam, Gaga Feminism (p. 111)

The demographic data speak loudly: the modern family—the nuclear family form consisting of a husband-wife pair who raise their biological offspring in a shared household—is not the numerical norm among households. The 2010 U.S. Census was the first in the history of the census to report that households headed by a husband-wife pair dipped below the 50% point (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012, April). Households in which a husband-and-wife pair lived with their “own children” dropped to 20.2%, whereas all other household forms showed percentage increases from the 2000 Census: heterosexual couples without their own children, single-parent households, single householders living with relatives other than their own children, same-sex partner households, cohabiting opposite-sex partner households, and households headed by an adult living either alone or with non-related others. Actually, the number of husband-wife households with their own biological children is lower than this percentage. The U.S. Census Report includes as “own children” “biological, adopted, and stepchildren of the householder who are under 18” (p. 4). Of the approximately 74 million children under age 18, about 29% live with a single parent, 2.1% are adopted, 3.8% are stepchildren, 7.9% live with a
grandparent, 2.2% live with another relative (usually an aunt or uncle), and 1.8% live with a nonrelative. These demographic data document a myriad of family forms that collectively are referred to as post-nuclear families, nontraditional families, alternative families, or postmodern families, and they enact what Stacey (1990) describes as the “unpredictable, often incongruous, and contested character of contemporary family practices” (p. 5) of the contemporary American family.

**The Contested Nature of “Family”**

To some, the demographic portrait is reason for alarm: a nostalgic mourning for the decline in “family.” However, as family historian Stephanie Coontz (1992), among others, has observed, this call to return to what is viewed as the “natural” nuclear family structure is based more on myth than on evidence of what family structure actually was like in pre-industrial America. More broadly, scholars of the history of the European family have concurred, observing that a view of the nuclear family as the natural family form is more myth than reality (e.g., Kertzer, 1991; Shorter, 1975).

The mourning of some imagined “natural” family of the historic past documents the omnipresence of a dominant ideology of “family” in which the nuclear family is valued as the natural family form. But, as the cultural critic Pierre Bourdieu (1996) has observed,

> The dominant, legitimate definition of the normal family (which may be explicit, as it is in law, or implicit, in for example, the family questionnaires used by the state statistical agencies) is based on a constellation of words … which, while seeming to describe social reality, in fact construct it. … A number of the groups that are called “families” in the present-day USA have absolutely no resemblance to [the] dominant definition, and … in most modern societies the nuclear family is a minority experience. … The new forms of family bonds that are being invented before our eyes remind us that this family, which we are led to regard as natural because it presents itself with the self-evidence of what “has always been that way,” is a recent invention, and is perhaps fast disappearing. (p. 19)

“Family,” in other words, is not a natural state of social bonding but a cultural creation. Unfortunately, what is commonly accepted as “natural” becomes a standard against which alternatives are judged as “unnatural,” a deviation from what is “normal,” and thus subject to a judgment of inferiority or illegitimacy. As Bourdieu continued,

> Every time we use a classificatory concept like “family,” we are making both a description and a prescription, which is not perceived as such because it is (more or less) universally accepted and goes without saying. We tacitly admit that the reality to
which we give the name “family,” and which we place in the category of “real” families, is a family in reality. (p. 20)

Familial arrangements that depart from the ideological “gold standard” of the nuclear family face a burden of legitimation, or what Kathleen Galvin refers to in the next chapter as the burden of discourse dependence.

But not so fast, you might be thinking. Apart from a general claim that many people bemoan the demographics in which the nuclear family appears to be on the decline, what evidence can be presented to support the claim that the ideology of the nuclear family is still alive and well in contemporary Western societies, the U.S. in particular? We can think metaphorically of the ideology of the nuclear family as a stool with three legs: co-residence, heterosexual marriage, and shared genes. These three ideological “legs” are inscribed in public policy, the attitudes of typical Americans, and even in the practices of social scientists who study families.

Let’s start at the public policy level with the U.S. Census Report (U.S. Census, 2012, April), with which I began this introduction. All three ideological legs through which the nuclear family is supported as the preferred norm seep into the very statistical fabric of this census undertaking.

First, this document, and the census practices that produced it, privileges shared residence as the portal of entry into the American family: “A ‘household’ includes all of the people who occupy a housing unit” (U.S. Census, 2012, April p. 4). One person in each household is designated by the census participant as the “householder,” usually “the person, or one of the persons, in whose name the home is being purchased or rented” (p. 4). In the ideology of the nuclear family, this identified householder is often the male head of household in a heterosexual married couple. All other household members are linked through association to this householder, and a family represents a particular kind of social arrangement: “A family consists of a householder and one or more other people living in the same household who are related to the householder by birth, marriage, or adoption” (p. 4).

The requirement of shared residence clearly instantiates one anchor of the metaphorical stool of the traditional family unit. However, as Stacey (1990, p. 6) so eloquently expressed, for many individuals “family” “is a locus not of residence but of meaning and relationships.” When shared residence is invoked as a necessary criterion of “family,” certain social arrangements are dis-allowed as families. For example, a nonresidential parent with whom the children live for only a minority of their time does not count as a family because the majority of the time is spent with the residential parent. Similarly, stepfamilies in which the stepchild lives with the nonresidential parent and his or her new spouse for only part of the year are not included as a family form because the child does not reside in the household for a majority of the year. Additionally, persons who think of their extended family
as their “family” cannot be recognized as an official family unless all of the extended family members reside in the same household. Persons who think of their family as their close social network consisting of established bonds of affection and support—voluntary kin—are also precluded from family status, as well, unless they share a residence as a requisite condition. Such statistical invisibility makes it challenging for family policy to work on behalf of many types of families that do not share a residency, because their presence in the society cannot be statistically documented.

Although shared residence is a necessary condition for family status according to the U.S. Census Bureau, it is not sufficient. The definition of a family described above requires a relationship of marriage, legal adoption, or birth (blood). The U.S. Census Report (U.S. Census, 2012, April) is clear in privileging not just the institution of marriage, but a heterosexual, husband-wife marriage. In what can only be described as a stunning categorization feat, same-sex spousal households, the report informs the reader, are included in the category “same-sex unmarried partner households” (p. 4). Their status as a family is contingent on the presence of another person who is related to the householder (e.g., a biological or adopted child of the householder). Cohabiting heterosexual partners, in the absence of the presence of another person related to the householder, are also counted as a “nonfamily household,” as are households consisting of persons who live with others with whom they are unrelated (p. 4). The U.S. Census Bureau allows female and male householders, “no spouse present” (p. 4), to count as family households so long as they contain their “own children” or other persons with whom they are related by blood or law (e.g., a parent or a sibling). In short, a heterosexual husband-wife pair automatically qualifies for family status, but other social arrangements are eligible for family status only if a third party related by law or birth resides with the primary householder.

Family status can also be earned on the basis of birth, not simply law, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2012, April). The criterion of birth, of course, privileges a biogenetic conception of the family and the role of biological reproduction. Reported subcategories within the supra-category of “family households” are subdivided according to the presence or absence of “own children” under 18 years of age. Of course, the focus on children disadvantages households without children, by choice or circumstance, unless they are a heterosexual, husband-wife pair.

Statistical exclusion from family status does not distribute equally across racial/ethnic backgrounds. The ideological “gold standard” of families—the household consisting of a husband, wife, and their own children—captures 32% of Asian American households but only 13% of Black or African American households. Single parents with “own children” represent 20% of Black or African American households but only 7% of White, non-Hispanic households. Cohabiting pairs
(including same-sex spouses; see above discussion) reflect 11% of American Indian/Alaska Native households but only 4% of Asian American households. The implication is self-evident: racial/ethnic groups in the U.S. do not live in the ideologically preferred modern family structure to the same extent (and no group has a majority of its households described as a nuclear family), positioning members of some groups more than others to face larger discursive burdens of legitimacy.

The significance of government policy cannot be underestimated, because it is the locus of institutionalized legitimation and access to resources. As Butler (2002) astutely observed, “The failure to secure state recognition for one’s intimate arrangements can only be experienced as a form of derealization” (p. 26). Invisibility as a “real family,” in other words, implicates psychological and material disenfranchisement.

If we move beyond the institutionalization of shared residency, heterosexual marriage, and biological ties displayed in the U.S. Census Report (U.S. Census, 2012, April) to consider attitudes of typical Americans, we see the same pattern of privilege: the ideological “gold standard” of the nuclear family is still idealized, despite its diminished demographic presence. In his classic ethnographic study of American attitudes and beliefs about kinship, Schneider (1980) noted that American conceptions of the ideal family are organized by two core constituent elements: blood (through reproduction) and law (through marriage). He argued that these two elements are both rooted in sexual intercourse between a man and a woman: “The members of the family are defined in terms of sexual intercourse as a reproductive act, stressing the sexual relationship between husband and wife and the biological identity between parent and child, and between siblings” (p. 52). The institution of marriage formally recognizes the husband-wife union, and in turn legitimizes legal relationships that are formed through marriage: the various kinds of in-laws (parent, siblings, aunts/uncles). Of course, these two criteria become fuzzier the further removed they are from the nuclear family: is a third cousin twice removed regarded as “family”? Schneider argued that at the outer boundaries of blood and law, people introduce a third criterion to organize family status: emotional closeness. Thus, that third cousin who is twice removed could count as family if the persons experience some emotional solidarity with one another.

Although Schneider’s work is now dated, it is amazingly current in describing current American attitudes about “family.” The Pew Research Center (Morin, 2011) recently conducted a survey about American attitudes toward changes in family structure among a national, representative sample of 2,691 adults. Respondents were asked to judge seven trends in family structure as good, bad, or of no consequence for society, five of which are relevant to this volume:
more unmarried couples raising children, more gay and lesbian couples raising children, more single women having children without a male partner to help raise them, more people living together without getting married, and more women not ever having children (the two other trends included were mothers of young children working outside the home and people of different races marrying each other). About a third (31%) of participants was categorized as Accepters, disproportionately reporting that the trends were of no consequence or even good for society. A similar share of the respondents (32%), the Rejecters, indicated that the trends were bad for society. The remainder (37%) was categorized as Skeptics, expressing more reservations than the Accepters but not as uniformly negative as the Rejecters. Demographic differences differentiated the groups: Accepters were more likely to be women, Hispanics, East Coast residents, and those who rarely attended religious services. Rejecters were more likely to be Whites, older adults, Republicans, married, and religiously observant. Young people, Democrats and Independents, and minorities were disproportionately more likely to be Skeptics. Overall, relatively small percentages of any group regarded any of the trends as “a good thing for society” (p. 3). Thus, even the group that most embraced change—the Accepters—might better be described as merely less skeptical and negative than the other two groups. More telling were respondent answers to questions posed about the ideal family. Although the “gold standard” of a husband-and-wife married couple with children is the ideal, about 85–90% of members from the three groups regarded a childless heterosexual married couple as a family. Respondents ranged across groups from 74–96% in regarding a single parent with children as a family. A majority of the Accepters (96%) and the Skeptics (86%) regarded an unmarried heterosexual couple with children as a family, compared to only 55% of the Rejecters. A majority of the Accepters and the Skeptics (with percentages of 84% and 75%, respectively) also regarded a same-sex couple with children as a family, compared to only 31% of the Rejecters. Whereas a majority of the Accepters regarded a same-sex couple without children and an unmarried heterosexual couple without children as a family (68% and 60%, respectively) the majority of the other two groups reported that neither configuration was a family. The results of this public opinion survey suggest that the criteria of blood (represented by the presence of biological children) and heterosexual marriage are still significant features of the contemporary American attitude with respect to who counts as a “family.” Clearly “family” is conceived on a sliding scale; if a given household unit has both heterosexual marriage and biological children, it is regarded as more of a family than households that have one but not both of these core features, and household units that lack both of these elements—same-sex couples without children—are perceived as least like a family.
Research by scholars in family studies, including family communication, supports the pattern captured by the Pew Research Center (Morin, 2011). A number of studies have relied on study participant assessments of family status associated with a variety of different family structures. In 1990, Trost (1990) asked a Swedish sample to provide judgments of family status for various hypothetical family constellations, finding that the two-parent with child constellation was most frequently regarded as a family. Subsequent replications of this classic study with U.S. samples (Baxter et al., 2009; Ford, 1994) document the stability of privilege accorded the nuclear family. In particular, Baxter and her colleagues (2009) presented study participants with 23 different family scenarios designed to vary systematically with respect to several core structural features (e.g., presence vs. absence of marriage). The study also manipulated perceptions of the quantity of communication between family members. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which each scenario was a family. Although a perception of greater communication among the scenario members increased the perception of family status across all family structures, systematic differences in perception emerged based on structural feature. Results indicated that the presence of children, intactness (as opposed to separation and divorce), co-residence, marriage, heterosexuality (but only in the absence of children), and nonfictive status (i.e., the presence of some tie legitimated through blood or law) increased perceptions of family status. Highest family status was associated with the nuclear family scenario. To test of the importance accorded to a biogenetic link between parents and children, Holtzman (2008) asked her participants to respond to a hypothetical scenario of mistaken identity in which a mix-up at the hospital sent the wrong child home with parents. The study determined whether participants privileged biology over affection in the parent-child relationship. Although they experienced some ambivalence, participants still favored the sanctity of the biological bond overall.

Several studies have examined developmental differences in a child’s conception of family (e.g., Gilby & Pederson, 1982; Newman, Roberts, & Syre, 1993; Nixon, Greene, & Hogan, 2006; Powell, Wiltcher, Wedemeyer, & Claypool, 1981). Overall, this body of work suggests that children develop cognitively in ways that internalize society’s norms of “family.” Rigg and Pryor (2007), for example, asked children ages 9–13 to determine whether certain social constellations of people were a family. Study participants were most likely to define a married couple with children as family. However, the researchers also found that participants were quite inclusive overall. The researchers contrasted the outcomes of this study with one conducted with older adolescents (Anyan & Pryor, 2002), in which the older sample was less inclusive and used more stringent blood and law criteria of family status.
Members of nontraditional or alternative families perceive that they are stigmatized and misunderstood, facing challenges beyond those faced by nuclear families. Many of the chapters in this volume discuss this work, and I will not repeat a discussion of that research here. I will, however, provide a very personal account that provides a taste of what marginalized family status feels like. I am the single parent of an adopted daughter. One of the colleges to which my child applied found our financial aid application inadequate. First, the forms did not have a box that captured adequately our family status; marking “single” (from among the other two choices of “married” and “divorced”) didn’t suffice, as it turned out. “Single” parental status, it seems, still required me to have a nonresidential father complete financial forms before our financial aid package could be determined. I wrote “not applicable” on all of these forms for the nonresidential father, indicating that I had adopted my daughter from a foreign country when she was a baby and that there was, in fact, no nonresidential father who could provide financial assistance. The financial aid office replied by informing me that they couldn’t accept my application as it stood, asking me to document further that there was no additional income from the nonresidential father, perhaps through a testimonial by a minister or other respected person familiar with our family. I experienced that request for outside verification from a credible source as suspicion that my application lacked full disclosure. I felt that our family configuration was invisible—impossible for others to imagine. At that point, I complained and fortunately was heard. I share this personal experience because it nicely illustrates the additional discursive burden that accompanies family forms situated outside what is commonly understood as normative. In the end, our family was treated fairly by this financial aid office, but I had to work extra hard to bring this about. This example perhaps seems inconsequential, but it documents the everyday nature of lived experience outside the normative nuclear family. It underscores what Galvin describes in the next chapter as the external boundary management work that alternative family members face as they seek to gain legitimacy for their family by outsiders.

Scholars of family communication have, in part, contributed to a reproduction of the ideology of the nuclear family by devoting the bulk of their research attention to married heterosexual couples and parent interactions with their “own children”; invisibility is a consequence of unstudied or under-studied families. In their portrait of family communication research over the 1990–2009 period, Stamp and Shue (2013) reported that the most frequently studied context was the “married couple.” Related contexts such as “husbands,” “wives,” and “first marriage families” further implicate the marital dyad. “Children,” “parent-child,” and related terms implicate the centrality of children in researcher attention to the family. In an examination of over one thousand studies from the interdisciplinary area of family studies, Fingerman and Hay (2002) identified a similar abundance of work on
marriage and parent-child relationships. Schneider’s (1980) criteria of blood (through reproduction) and law (through marriage) appear to be central to contemporary research on the family. Furthermore, when alternative families are investigated, they are often studied in comparison to the “gold standard” of the traditional family, implying that the latter is the baseline against which all difference should be assessed (Pahl & Spencer, 2010).

“Family” as a Communicative Accomplishment

Although researchers still appear to privilege the traditional family as the object of study, several family scholars have opened the conceptual door in ways that are potentially helpful in understanding post-nuclear families from a communication perspective. In particular, three basic conceptual approaches to defining the family have emerged in family studies (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2013; Segrin & Flora, 2011; Wamboldt & Reiss, 1989). The structural approach emphasizes the presence or absence of particular family members or roles; this definition tends to favor legally institutionalized forms of family, especially the nuclear family. The second approach, the psychosocial task, defines a family according to the accomplishment of certain tasks together, such as maintaining a household, raising children, and providing financial security for fellow family members. Although this definition potentially is more encompassing of a variety of family forms, it tends to privilege co-residence and child-bearing/raising as the most valued tasks, thereby contributing in the end to the value attached to the nuclear family. The third approach, the transactional, focuses on “a sense of family identity with emotional ties and a shared experience of a history and a future” (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, p. 129) that flows from interaction over time. This third conceptual approach is not bound by either institutional or functional constraints, instead emphasizing the affectional bonds that create a feeling of family. Certainly, all three of these definitional criteria can apply to a given family; an emotionally close nuclear family that functions effectively meets all definitions at once. But not all nuclear families are functional or have a shared identity of emotional closeness. Some social groups feel like a family, although they lack structural institutionalization and enactment of all of the functions commonly associated with a family. Other social groups could enact basic functions such as child rearing but without institutionalization or emotional closeness. Certainly, structural approaches have dominated in family studies, including family communication, and the focus on the nuclear family evidences this approach.

Psychosocial task (i.e., functional) and transactional (identity-based and affection-based) approaches implicate communication most directly and thus are of greatest relevance to the contributors of this volume. Put simply, both of these
approaches share a view of the family as constructed or produced through the communicative actions of their members. Families are the result of what we do—the product of our everyday communicative accomplishments of functioning and feeling like a family (e.g., Medved, 2004; Nelson, 2006). Butler (2002) eloquently captured the essence of a functional approach to family, defining family as a set of practices “that emerge to address fundamental forms of human dependency, which may include birth, child-rearing, relations of emotional dependency and support, generational ties, illness, dying, and death (to name a few)” (p. 15). The litmus test of family status from a functional perspective is the “walks like a duck, talks like a duck, is a duck” approach; if a social group functions like a family, then it is a family, regardless of its institutionalized structure. Similarly, a transactional approach to family also emphasizes family-as-doing. However, unlike a functional approach, the emphasis is less on instrumental tasks that are enacted and more on the bonds of identity and affection that emerge over time through interaction. The litmus test of family status from a transactional approach is whether the members of a social group feel like a family. Both functional and transactional approaches emphasize communication, the former for its task capacities and the latter for its socioemotional capacities. Both of these approaches share a view that the family is a process of communicative enactment and performance.

From the perspective of functional and transactional approaches, a society’s preference for the nuclear family structure can be understood as a sedimentation of certain functions, affections, and identities that cultural members allow and favor. It is not “natural” but rather an ideological product. The nuclear family has become sedimented as the idealized family structure because it privileges sexual reproduction and child-rearing above all other functions and legitimates above all other kinds of affection that between heterosexual partners and parents and their own children. Legitimated family forms are thus the result of the everyday communicative actions of “family” members, as they ongoingly reproduce the status quo or construct alternative meanings of “family” with respect to allowed functions, affections, and identities. Post-nuclear families, taking a variety of forms, increase the palette of the allowable with respect to functions, affections, and identities of legitimate families.

The Present Volume

This volume represents recent scholarship by family communication scholars to understand, functionally and transactionally, how alternative families are constructed communicatively. In contrast to existing books on family communication, in
which chapters or paragraphs on selected post-nuclear family forms are introduced as “add-on” counterpoint to an emphasis on nuclear families, I wanted to produce a book that gathered together as many alternatives to the nuclear family as we could identify that had amassed sufficient research to warrant a whole chapter. I wanted to produce a volume in which each alternative family form was considered on its own terms, rather than in comparison to the nuclear family. Certainly, the volume does not exhaust all of the kinds of family that are lived daily in these postmodern times. For example, foster care families or families developed through reproductive technologies receive mention in some of the chapters but await more scholarly attention by communication researchers to justify their own chapters. I also wanted to stretch beyond the boundaries of U.S. society, a challenging enterprise for family communication scholars who disproportionately focus on families in the U.S. Although anthropologists of kinship have been describing for quite some time the various forms of kinship in non-Western societies, this book is not envisioned as a comparative study of the family. Rather, the organizing question for the book focuses on resistance, reconstruction, and resilience: how is it that alternatives to the traditional family are constructed and sustained through communicative practices?

The word “remaking” in the title of the book is intended at both macro and micro levels. At the macro level, the various chapters in the book document a variety of family forms that collectively contribute to the proportional decline in the nuclear family unit, a description of which opened this chapter. But a risk in organizing a book by family form is the ease with which these categories can be seen as stable and discrete. If one were to follow a given family through time with a micro-level analysis, a more dynamic portrait would emerge in which family members float in and out of various family forms. Using myself as an example, in my lifetime I have been a member of a nuclear family, a commuter marriage family, an extended family, a single-parent biological family, a stepfamily, a single-parent adoptive family, and several fictive kin families. My suspicion is that the contributors to, and readers of, this volume could report similar fluidity in their lived experiences of family. The military family, discussed in Chapter Twelve by Erin Sahlstein Parcell, nicely illustrates the fluidity of family forms, as family members move in and out of deployments and re-entries to co-present family life. In short, individuals remake their own families across the lifespan and thereby constitute the family forms that demographers study at the societal, or macro, level.

The post-nuclear family forms highlighted in this book manifest varying degrees of blood and law. The stepfamily combines blood (biological offspring of a residential parent) with the legal bond of remarriage between adults. The adopted family supplants a biological parent-child relationship with a
legal one. Single-parent families suspend the legal institution of marriage but retain a biological/legal parent-child relationship. Same-sex partnerships challenge the institution of heterosexual marriage. Grandfamilies—grandparents who serve as the primary parent—retain a legal or biological link to the child. Childless families retain marriage. Deployed military families and commuter marriage families suspend shared residence but retain some legal/biological bond among family members. Hindu marriages of urban India retain the legal institution of marriage but construct it along affectional lines. Diasporic families abandon the shared residence of the extended family unit in the face of geographic separation across nations. Fictive, or voluntary, kin typically suspend legal, biological, and perhaps even shared-residence features in envisioning family in new ways. Clearly, if we accept Galvin’s argument in the next chapter, members of these various family forms assume different discursive burdens depending on their claims to the legitimated anchors of co-residence, heterosexual marriage, and biological reproduction—those three “legs” of the dominant ideology of family discussed above. None of the family forms described in the volume meets the ideological “gold standard” of the nuclear family, and in this sense they all represent a remaking of the family in profound ways.

The book is organized into four parts. Part I, “Introductory Framings” consists of this opening introductory chapter and two conceptual/theoretical chapters. In Chapter Two, Kathleen Galvin discusses her concept of discourse dependence, an important historical construct in anchoring efforts by family communication scholars to expand beyond studying marriages and biological parent-child relationships to give visibility to a variety of alternative ways of doing family. In Chapter Three, I follow up on Galvin’s important conceptual work in discourse dependence to consider ways to theoretically explain and understand how discourse dependence is communicatively enacted. Several theories are mentioned throughout this book, and this chapter is an attempt to put the spotlight directly on selected theoretical issues that can illuminate discourse dependence. Three central theoretical issues (the three R’s of the chapter’s title) are emphasized: Remaking (the need to study communication in its own right), Resistance (the need to examine how stigma/marginalization are resisted), and Resilience (the need to study the factors that contribute to family success and well-being).

Parts II, III, and IV of the book organize chapters devoted, respectively, to communicative remakings of “family” that move beyond traditional marriage, beyond biological ties, and beyond shared residence. Several of the chapters could easily fit in more than one of these sections of the book. Stepfamilies, for example, typically contain two households—that of the residential parent and that of the nonresidential parent—and could just as easily have been placed in
the last section of the book in which co-residence is suspended. However, given that much of the research focuses on the non-biological relationships in step-families, especially the stepparent-stepchild, I decided to locate the stepfamily chapter in the section of the book devoted to remaking “family” beyond biological ties. Because biological linkages are given rather than voluntary, I decided to place the chapter on voluntary kin relations in Part III of the book, but voluntary kin members also challenge the institution of marriage and often co-residence, as well. Many single parents and gay/lesbian pairs adopt children. And so on, as we contemplate the many permutations of the post-nuclear family.

Part II of the book, “Remaking ‘Family’ Beyond Traditional Marriage,” contains four chapters that cohere around communicative challenges to traditional marriage as requisite to family status. In Chapter Four, Pamela Lannutti takes up the political dispute that is highly visible in U.S. society—whether gays and lesbians should be granted legal rights to marry. Lannutti presents a complex picture, addressing, in part, the fissure within the gay/lesbian community on this issue. The institution of marriage is steeped in heteronormativity, patriarchy, and sexual reproduction, and one issue of concern is whether legitimation of same-sex marriages co-opts the critique of that institution. Chapter Five, by Tamara Afifi, Shardé Davis, and Anne Merrill, examines how single-parent families create a sense of “family” through their communicative practices with one another. Many, but certainly not all, single-parent families are the product of divorce, and many might transition into stepfamily status. But other single-parent families do not fit this pattern at all. Regardless, single-parent families face unique challenges. The chapter emphasizes the communicative practices of resilience that characterize many of these families. Chapter Six, by Melissa Alemán, pursues grandfamilies in which at least one grandparent is the primary caregiver of a grandchild. This family form is different from a multi-generational family unit in which at least one parent resides with children and the children's grandparents; grandfamilies are missing parents. Last, Chapter Seven, by Devika Chawla, pushes our sensibilities out of the U.S. to examine urban India. Although the institution of heterosexual marriage is central to Indian ideology of the family, it is the arranged marriage that is privileged: a conception of marriage in which a given husband-wife pair is integrally woven together in an extended family web headed by the husband’s parents. Chawla considers how urban Indian women communicatively perform an alternative understanding of their arranged marriages, one that emphasizes romantic love.

Part III, “Remaking ‘Family’ beyond Biological Ties,” consists of four chapters that challenge in one way or another the sanctity accorded to biological reproduction and biological children in constituting “family.” Keli Steuber examines childless families in Chapter Eight. She considers the extraordinary pressure
to reproduce experienced by many infertile heterosexual couples, and the pressures experienced by couples who make the voluntary choice to remain childfree. The ideology of the nuclear family is evident in both kinds of experiences. In Chapter Nine, Elizabeth Suter reviews the growing communication research on the adopted family—whether the child is adopted domestically through private adoption or the public child welfare system of foster care, or through transnational adoption. In both kinds of adoption, transracial families are often constructed in visible adoptions. Adoption typically is conceived as a triangle of relationships consisting of the adopted child, the birth mother and other blood relations, and the adoptive family. Chapter Ten, by Paul Schrodt, reviews the now fairly extensive communication research on stepfamilies. Stepfamilies experience a range of challenges, and as a result, remarried partners in stepfamily configurations face, as a group, a high divorce rate (National Stepfamily Resource Center, 2013). Schrodt examines the communicative practices that are related to stepfamily resilience or decline. Finally, Dawn Braithwaite and Rebecca DiVerniero examine so-called fictive or voluntary kin in Chapter Eleven. They demonstrate that the voluntary family is not a unitary type but instead is a mix of several functional types, each with their own unique communicative challenges.

Part IV, “Remaking ‘Family’ beyond Shared Households,” consists of three chapters that challenge in one way or another the requisite of co-residence for family status. In Chapter Twelve, Erin Sahlstein Parcell examines the unique communicative challenges and practices of resilience faced by military families who have at least one deployed family member. In contrast to military deployment, which usually unfolds for fixed time periods of time, Karla Bergen addresses in Chapter Thirteen more permanent long-distance families: the so-called commuter family in which adults have separate residences. The challenges of long distance are highlighted in both of these chapters, but these two family forms are enacted somewhat differently, as well. The final chapter in the volume, Chapter Fourteen by Chitra Akkoor, moves us beyond U.S. borders in a consideration of diasporic families. Although the U.S. is populated with many diasporic families, the diasporic family experience is a global one, and Akkoor’s chapter emphasizes the global problems faced by families who immigrate to Western societies that privilege the nuclear family instead of the extended family unit.

References are assembled at the end of the volume for the convenience of the reader interested in a reference compendium of classic and recent work on family remakings.
“Family” emerged as a highly contested term during the last quarter of the 20th century. It remains so today. Around the dawn of the 21st century, numerous scholars and journalists addressed these changes. Controversial family scholar Judith Stacey claimed that “Voting with their hearts and deeds rather than their words and creeds, the vast majority of Americans have been actively remaking their family lives, and their expectations about family life as well” (1996, p. 9). Sociologist Andrew Cherlin (2009a) depicted contemporary family life as “a bewildering set of alternatives” (p. 8), arguing that these variations impacted everyday life. To the shock of many longtime readers, in 2002 the Sunday New York Times’ wedding announcements section included commitment ceremonies between same-sex partners for the first time. Concurrently, many K-12 schools expanded the options for who may attend “school conferences,” previously known as “parent-teacher conferences.” Today the concept of family remains in flux as fewer families are formed solely through law and biology than was the case in the past century.

Discourse—that is, language use—now serves as the third leg of the “definitional family stool” due to its increasing importance in family identity construction,
maintenance and deconstruction. An examination of contemporary families created and/or recreated through blood, law, and discourse reveals that discourse plays an increasingly significant role in constructing family identity when the cultural indicators of blood and/or law are less salient or absent. Over the past four decades, as increasing numbers of families confronted challenges to their identity, members found themselves engaging outsiders or each other in discourse designed to establish, and re-establish, their familial identities.

Discourse contributes to the creation of family identity both implicitly and explicitly. It undergirds the everyday lives of all families as it instantiates members’ identity for outsiders and, frequently, even for insiders. As the family formation process shifts farther away from legal and biological ties, members find themselves enacting a wide range of discourse strategies to create, maintain, reconfigure and/or disconfirm their overall family identity and/or specific relational ties. Currently family identity serves as a commonplace subject of conversation between and among outsiders and insiders. Outsiders sometimes challenge, directly or indirectly, the validity of a familial claim when members bear little resemblance to each other; variations, such as age differences or skin color, call family membership into question. Conversely, even insiders express curiosity or concern regarding their own or another’s familial status.

When a familial claim is challenged, family members’ use of discourse strategies supports their ability to create and maintain their identity as a social group and to establish and reinforce family meanings. Members engage in communicative strategies to create, maintain and reinforce their own or other members’ family identity. These strategies include such discourse practices as: telling family birth stories, participating in special family rituals, managing family identity secrets, developing unique family terminology, establishing communication rules about discussing identity, and creating family histories to share with each other and/or outsiders. Such implicit and explicit strategies serve to enhance family members’ cohesion while signaling members’ connections to outsiders.

In recent decades, family researchers across multiple disciplines have acknowledged the role of interactional effort or, more specifically, the role of discourse in constructing family identity (Gordon, 2009, Holstein & Gubrium, 1999; Nelson, 2006, Tannen, 2007). Everyday discourse plays a continuous role in managing family identity, even for members sharing full blood and/or legal ties. For members of families formed outside of full bloodlines and legal ties, conscious strategic discourse assumes an increasingly significant role in constructing or deconstructing familial identity. Therefore, the role of discourse in constructing and maintaining contemporary family identity warrants far greater attention than it has received to date.

Currently, increasing numbers of family communication scholars engage in the active exploration of “how the meanings surrounding individual and relationship
identities are constructed through language use” (Baxter, 2011, p. 2). This essay addresses the processes involved in discursively constructing, maintaining, reconfiguring, and disconfirming family identity. To appreciate fully this ongoing discursive familial evolution, some elaborated background is in order before returning to the discussion of family interaction and identity.

A Brief Historical Overview

Family history varies significantly across countries and cultures. American history privileges sentimental depictions of middle and upper class marriages and two-parent families. Although images of the tightly knit extended family and the biological nuclear family remain firmly embedded in hallowed memory, because this family form thrived during much of the 20th century, complex relational ties characterized American family life from the first settlers to the present. According to noted family historian Stephanie Coontz (1999b), “there has never been a single family model in the United States and that change has been a constant feature of every kind of family” (p. xii).

Status of the Family

Early American history depicts significant variations in family forms as countless immigrants and pioneers struck out alone, or in pairs, creating some type of family form within the communities they founded or joined. Only in the late 19th century did Americans begin to elevate the nuclear family and its attendant expectations of loyalty, obligation, and personal satisfaction. Even in this period, a significant percentage of the population did not experience this family form, and even those that did experienced it as a mother-child alliance and a formal husband-wife connection (Coontz, 1992). Far fewer contemporary American families reflect full blood and legal ties compared to families in the middle of the 20th century. This shift to valuing the nuclear family form, reflected in many Western nations, is not necessarily generalizable to non-Western nations.

The early 20th century bore witness to the Great Depression and two World Wars, each of which deeply affected American family life. World War II provided women with a taste of life in the labor force, a circumstance that created new workplace options for women. A post-war nation idealized marriage and family; suburbs developed, and life in single-family homes filled with children became the norm and/or dream for countless young couples who married during the late 1940s into the early 1960s. Because marriage was viewed as a “forever” commitment, parents attempted to ensure their offspring met the “right” potential mates
Adoption agencies carefully matched adoptive parents and a child, in order to suggest a biological tie and save parents from the stigma of infertility (Riley & Van Vleet, 2012). This period became known as the “golden era of the American family” (Kendall-Tackett, 2001, p. 84). Other family variations received scant scholarly or journalistic attention.

Radical changes to the image and enactment of family life occurred during the late 1960s and 1970s; this period witnessed strong challenges to established familial relational patterns and assumptions. Family members’ conflicts over the Vietnam War contributed to generational schisms. The Women’s Movement persuaded many wives and mothers to leave the house in order to enter the workplace, while the “pill” provided women, married or single, with control over their fertility. Increasing numbers of women enrolled in college, meeting and marrying men from different classes, races, and religions. Divorce rates soared as women became more educated and financially independent, and as states passed no-fault divorce laws beginning with California in 1969. Political upheavals and personal opportunities forever altered the “Leave It to Beaver” image of “The American Family.”

Academic writings on the family proliferated, much of it focused on marriage and children in the later decades of the 20th century. In 1973 sociologist Jessie Bernard published her landmark book *The Future of Marriage*, arguing that partners live within two marriages—his marriage and her marriage—and that his marriage involves greater control, power, and freedom. Such messages reinforced women’s desire for greater gender equality. Yet, a decade later, Blumstein and Schwartz published *American Couples* (1983), a landmark study of four couple types—heterosexual married, heterosexual cohabiting, lesbian, and gay male—concluding that “The American family has changed more in the last thirty years than in the previous two hundred and fifty” (p. 25). They also acknowledged how little was known about the everyday lives of three of their couple types. Their book received extensive press, shocking academics and everyday adults alike.

Amidst growing change and upheaval, the nuclear family maintained its dominant and desirable image, privileging the qualities of heterosexuality, parenthood, biological children, marriage and legality, well into the last quarter of the 20th century. Legal recognition of other family forms remained difficult because, “The idealization of a natural nuclear family is preserved through constant reiteration and recitation of family ideology in political and social rituals—these images are reflected in law” (Fineman, 1993, p. 392). Although variations in family forms continued to be viewed as less desirable, the age of first marriage continued to rise as did divorce rates (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992). During this period transracial and transnational partnerships and adoption gained greater acceptance, creating multiple families formed through “visible difference.”
The rise in transnational and transracial adoption also reflected the high number of single White pregnant women choosing to raise their children as single parents (Pertman, 2011).

By the close of the 20th century the nature of “The American Family” appeared more complicated and contentious. In 1992 Coontz argued that “Compared to the first sixty years of the twentieth century, then, there is now an increasing diversity of family types in America” (p. 183). For example, according to Footlick (1990), “In unprecedented numbers, our families are unalike” (p. 9). A 1990 Newsweek poll revealed that, by a ratio of three to one, respondents defined the family as a group of people who love and care for each other” rather than relying on a legalistic definition of a group of people related by blood, marriage, or adoption (Stacey, 1996, p. 9). Extending the conversation to a logical conclusion, the renowned sociologist Anthony Giddens (1993), theorized that the economic and social conditions of late modernity enabled a liberated practice of intimacy that he labeled “pure relationship” (p. 2). He went on to assert that, because it was now possible to separate sexuality from childbearing, individuals could pursue intimacy for its own sake and such intimate relationships would endure only as long as each partner experienced enough satisfaction to remain in it. The ongoing increases in sequential partnerships, voluntary childless marriage (Durham & Braithwaite, 2009), and same-sex partnerships (Lewin, 2009) serve to support his position. Arguments on the future of the family raged into the 21st century as various factions advanced various criteria for being a “real” family; in some circles they continue to rage.

The Status of Marriage

Historically, marriage was viewed by many as the gold standard of adult relational life, a pact sanctioned by law and frequently by God—a commitment severed only by death. Yet, the history of American marriage reveals an “elusive traditional family” (Coontz, 1992, p. 10). Although images of the “until death do us part” ideal marriage remain to this day, everyday life belied such stereotypical images. Increasingly adults lived alternative partnered lives, yet little was known about their relationships, such as heterosexual cohabiting pairs and same-sex partnerships. Legal scholar Fineman (1993) depicted marriage as the venerated family form protected by legal and cultural institutions, warning that living in alternative intimate arrangements left individuals outside the protection of legal and cultural institutions. His warning went unheeded.

Today marriage remains an idealized partnership form, even though trends reveal that barely half of adults are currently married (Cohn, Passel, Wang & Livingston, 2011). First marriages take place later, usually after a period of cohabitation
Yet, individuals increasingly opt for nontraditional partnerships. Within the past fifty years the lockstep pattern of long marriages with multiple children devolved to various lifestyle alternatives; many first marriages occur after the bride has borne one or more children, a significant reversal of the traditional U.S. marriage pattern but a replication of the Western European shift to marriage after children, if at all (Eurostat, 2012). Cherlin (2009a) characterizes contemporary U.S. marriages as more fragile than those in many other countries, attributing this fragility to the cultural assumption that marriage should fulfill each partner’s personal needs and desires. Expectations of companionship, intimacy and security place strong demands on each partner; such expectations do not necessarily exist in many other cultures, especially in Eastern cultures.

Yet, although individuals and partnerships can thrive outside of marriage, it continues to be the most desired and most prestigious way to have a family—“the ultimate merit badge” (Cherlin, 2009a, p. 142). Given the economic pressures, marriage remains outside the reach of many lower income individuals while appearing personally or politically undesirable to others. Yet, given the opportunity, increasing numbers of members of same-sex partnerships choose to make a legal marital commitment to maintain a partnership “until death do us part.” For many, marriage still remains an elusive dream.

U.S. Population Trends

Recent U.S. Census data confirm major ongoing changes in family life, variations that eventually impact the family identity discourse that members engage in with outsiders and other members of their families. Therefore, a very brief overview of family life seems to be in order.

Americans are marrying at older ages. Between 2006 and 2010 the median age at marriage was 25.8 for women and 28.3 for men (Copen, Daniels, Vespa & Mosher, 2012). A 2009 Census Report indicates that later marriage contributes to the later age of divorce, and those who recently married had higher levels of education than the general population (Elliott & Simmons, 2011).

Marriage duration continues to decline. In the 2006–2010 period, the probability of a first marriage lasting at least 10 years was 68% for women and 70% for men and lasting at least 20 years was 52% for women and 56% for men. Those who married before age 20 had a lower probability of reaching the 20-year mark (Copen et al., 2012).

Birth patterns continue to change. Overall, the U.S. birthrate has fallen to a record low with the greatest drop occurring among immigrants (Livingston & Cohn, 2012). The trend in number of births dropped from 2007 (4,316,233) to 2012 (3,958,000) (Hamilton & Sutton, 2013). The mean age of first-time
mothers increased by 3.6 years from 1970 to 2006, from 21.4 to 25.0 years old (Mathews & Hamilton, 2009). Among women, a higher percentage of first births occurred within a cohabiting union, although many such unions do not survive two years after the birth. Race and ethnicity also plays a role. Approximately 80% of first births to black women and 73% to black men were premarital, whereas 53% of first births to Hispanic women were and 56% of Hispanic men were premarital (Martinez, Daniels & Chandra, 2012).

Other family features and forms continue to alter the face of the family. One in seven, or 14% of 2008 marriages, were interracial or interethnic (Passel, Wang, & Taylor, 2010). According to a 2012 Gallup Poll, 3.4% of U.S. adults identify as LGBT (Gates & Newport, 2012). Over 8.5 million adoptees reside in the U.S. Every year about 140,000 children find adoptive homes (Riley & Van Vleet, 2012); approximately 400,000 children live within the foster care system, at any given time (Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System [AFCARS], 2011).

The American family continues to change rapidly with no end in sight to the variations that will result from this evolutionary process, although, according to Stacey (2011), “the word family continues to conjure up an image of a married, monogamous, heterosexual pair and their progeny” (p. 4). Yet the reality demonstrates that as individuals live longer and the decrease in legal adult ties makes it easier for individuals to move on when dissatisfied with a current partnership, familial ties will become even more fluid. Therefore, family members will, of necessity, rely more heavily on discourse to establish the nature of their familial ties.

International and Intercultural Differences

Much scholarly writing on family interaction overlooks cultural differences from a global perspective. In many Asian countries, for example, geographic migrations impact the traditional beliefs about filial piety and the significant role of family elders; the latter has undergone great change as young adults move to cities or countries far from home, making elder caretaking impossible. Many Chinese young adults from rural areas move to large cities for a university education or secure valued employment, leaving elderly family members with very limited contact and support from their adult children. Recently, in response to the outcry of older parents, the Chinese government passed a law requiring adult children to visit their parents regularly, or at least talk with them on the phone (Einhorn, 2013). Other recent major changes in Chinese families include the diminishment of the parent-child dyad, an increase in husband-wife decision making, a decline in favoring sons, and an increase in marriages based on romantic love (Lee & Mock, 2005).