CHAPTER 22

Communication Theory and the Family

Mary Anne Fitzpatrick and L. David Ritchie

Introduction

Communication is a "god" term in our society because it is viewed as a panacea for ailing human relationships. Communication has moved from the periphery to center stage as the sine qua non of family life. Communication is central to family life today because the expectations for personal relationships have changed slowly but inexorably in this century. Although many of the traditional functions of the family have been delegated to other social agencies (e.g., care of the aged, education of the children, and so forth), the nurturance function remains. And, the nurturance of family members takes place primarily through the exchange of verbal and nonverbal messages (Fitzpatrick & Badzinski, 1985).

Although the centrality of communication in the modern family is acknowledged across the social sciences, a great deal of the research that such a position inspires has an obvious applied focus. Researchers seek to uncover the set of communication skills that lead to healthy family functioning, or conversely, those that are correlated to distress or abuse. Though not without pragmatic value, much of the research on communication in the family is atheoretical. Consequently, this work is unlikely to lead to advances in our understanding of communication processes within the family.

In this chapter, we do not cover the applied work in communication nor the popular treatments of the topic. Rather, we consider some theoretical issues about communication as they have been applied to the family. We begin with a short history of the academic discipline of "communication" and discuss the nature of that discipline. We proceed to define the concept of "human communication" and discuss the nature of that discipline. We succeed in defining the concept of "human communication." From there, we examine the three major metaphors that have influenced theory and research on communication in the family and demonstrate how each one favors one part of a complete definition of communication. Finally, we discuss directions for future research.

Historical Perspective: The Family in Communication Science

Whether conceived as a process of making facts mutually manifest (Sperber & Wilson, 1986) or as a process of developing and sustaining definitions of reality in relationships (Berger & Kellner,
1964), communication plays a central role in the modern family. As we demonstrate in this chapter, theoretical work on communication is important for understanding the dynamics of the modern family. Conversely, the family is in many ways a unique context of communication. For this reason, a theory of family communication is important for understanding communication processes in general. In spite of this apparent convergence of interests, social scientists in a number of academic disciplines interested in the family as a context of communication have only recently begun to acknowledge similar interests.

Part of the explanation for this disciplinary parochialism lies with the diversity of research objectives. Each discipline approaches the study of family interaction in a somewhat unique fashion. Part of this uniqueness comes from the different emphasis that each discipline places on the various levels of analysis from which an examination of the family can proceed, including the study of processes within individuals; interactions between individuals; properties of the component relationships themselves; the family group as a whole; and the influences of the broader community on the family (Fitzpatrick & Wamboldt, 1990).

The Academic Discipline of Communication

We adopt the Berger and Chaffee's (1987) definition of communication science as the discipline that seeks to understand the production, processing, and effects of symbol and signal systems by developing testable theories. As an academic discipline, communication science encompasses a number of different foci, perspectives, and emphases that strive to explain and predict relationships among widely divergent types of variables (Berger & Chaffee, 1987). The particular strength of the academic discipline of communication, particularly for the study of the family, is that it is a "variable" field that focuses attention on one category of behavior—communication—across many levels of analysis (Paisley, 1984). This perspective contrasts with "levels" fields, such as psychology or sociology, that examine a number of behaviors at one primary level of analysis, such as the individual or group.

In addition to this levels of analysis issue, at least equally important in shaping the development of family communication research has been the particular history of communication research as an academic discipline within the modern university. Unique to communication science is the parallel development of multiple departments with overlapping interests but divergent historical perspectives. Many of the nation's larger universities have two or more departments of "communication," usually located in distinct administrative branches, with different reward structures, serving unique "clientele," and often with competing claims to university and societal resources. This administrative fragmentation is justified by qualifying the department names with labels such as "mass" versus "interpersonal" that originate not in any conceptual model of the communication process but rather in the history of the various departments as offshoots of either journalism or speech. Frequently the various departments are further balkanized by distinctions between "theoretical" and "applied" faculty, by epistemological loyalties (critical, rhetorical, quantitative, and so on), and according to whether communication is conceptualized primarily as an informative action by which facts are made mutually manifest or as a relational action by which social structure is reproduced. The study of communication in the family lies across both the administrative ("mass" vs. "interpersonal") and the definitional ("informative" vs. "relational") fault line. For reasons that have to do more with institutional opportunities than with theoretical commitments, mass communication researchers have primarily studied the parent-child dyad, whereas interpersonal researchers have emphasized the marital dyad (Meadowcroft & Fitzpatrick, 1988). Researchers in both traditions often cite the same sociologists and social psychologists but they infrequently cite one another (but see, Fitzpatrick, 1990; Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990).

Mass Communication Research

During the 1950s, mass communication departments arose within the field of journalism education. Early theoretical interests were strongly influenced by traditional concerns with questions of propaganda and persuasion, free expression and regulation, political participation and all of the opportunities and problems associated with new media technology (Czitrom, 1982; Delia, 1987; Gitlin, 1978). These traditional journalistic in-