C H A P T E R 3

Why Does My Family Communicate This Way?: Theories of Family Communication

On completion of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Define *theory*.
- Explain the four primary purposes of theories.
- Explain the major theoretical perspectives/paradigms.
- Describe *epistemology*, *ontology*, and *axiology*.
- Evaluate a theory based on criteria specific to the theory type.
- Explain and apply several theories common to family communication research.

C A S E   S T U D Y

In 2004, two young adults were blissfully married in Hawaii. Dwayne and Maria met three years earlier through mutual friends and fell madly in love. Following one year of dating, Dwayne proposed to Maria in 2002. The couple was out with friends watching the Ohio State Buckeyes win the NCAA national championship game. Immediately following the game, Dwayne dropped to bended knee and popped the big question. Maria was elated!

The happiness the couple felt at the moment, unfortunately, quickly dissipated when they shared the news of their engagement with Maria's family. Dwayne is African American and Maria is Caucasian, and Maria's family did not accept Dwayne into their family unit. Due to the family tension, in 2004 Maria and Dwayne opted to elope and get married in Hawaii. Though Dwayne and Maria are happily married, four years later Maria's family still does not accept their relationship. To complicate matters, Maria recently found out she is expecting their first child. Her family is outraged.

As you read through Chapter 3, think about the following issues:

- Using theories common to family communication scholarship, attempt to explain and predict the communication by Maria's family in this situation.
- What does narrative theory tell us about how Maria and Dwayne's story is told to friends outside of the family?
- In terms of rules theory, who constructs the rules for this family? What might the result be if the rules are broken?

When you hear the word *theory*, what comes to mind? We all have theories about how phenomena work and how things should go. In fact, the other day a Communication Theory student explained his theory of why exams should be eliminated in college. A few hours later, a colleague was explaining her theory about why faculty members need meetings on a regular basis. She argued that if all meetings were held on Friday afternoons, we would then have fewer meetings we were required to attend. What kinds of theories guide your thoughts about behaviors, events, and people? How are these theories developed?

In Chapter 3, we begin by defining theory. In addition to providing a working definition of theory, this chapter includes a discussion of the purposes of theories, an overview of the perspectives from which scholars view theory, and established criteria by which we may evaluate theories of family communication. While it is beyond the scope of this text to address all communication theories, several of the theories commonly used in family communication research are explained in this chapter. As you read Chapter 3, think about how you would evaluate each theory. What do you like about each theory? What do you dislike about each theory? If you were asked to create your own theory of family communication, what would that theory look like?

What Is Theory?

According to Frey, Botan, Friedman, and Kreps (1991), a theory is a generalization about a phenomenon that explains how and/or why something occurs. Generally, this definition speaks to one of the purposes of theories—to explain phenomena. As humans, we all want to know why things work the way they do, but we also want to be able to describe what a phenomenon is in more detail. Thus, as we look at Julia Wood's definition of theory, she includes elements in her description as, "an account of what something is, how it works, what it produces or causes to happen, and what can change how it operates" (2004, p. 31). Wood included the phrase "what it produces or causes to happen," which indicates the causal nature of theories. While we often look to theories to show us cause-and-effect relationships, explanation is not the only purpose of a theory.

We define **theory** as a system of statements linked logically that may be used to explain, predict, and understand human phenomena. In this definition of theory, we acknowledge theories may be used to explain and predict behavior, but also realize the important role of theory in helping us understand the "how" and "why" of communication. As we will see throughout this chapter, theorizing is a process, and the output helps us understand human phenomenon. So, what *is* the purpose of a theory?

Purposes of Theory

A wise man once said, "Nothing is worth anything without purpose." Theory, in and of itself, is not devoid of purpose. In the most general sense, theories help us make sense of our world. More specifically, there are four primary purposes of theory: to describe, to predict, to explain, and to control phenomena within a given context.

Let's begin with the first function of theory—to describe. Before we can understand how and/or why something works, we must be able to provide a **description**. Wood defines description as "a process of using symbols to represent phenomena" (2004, p. 32). How would you describe the relationship between Dwayne and Maria, and Maria's family as illustrated in the case study at the beginning of this chapter? While only speculating, we could describe the relationship as strained, tense, and perhaps even unfriendly.

One theory of communication that might help explain the communication in Maria and Dwayne's family is uncertainty reduction theory. (Berger, 1979). The basic premise of the theory is that when people initially meet, uncertainty levels are high, prohibiting relationship development. In order to begin to develop a relationship, we first need to reduce uncertainty through communication. Thus, as communication increases, uncertainty should decrease. We may be able to use uncertainty reduction theory to *describe* the relationship between Dwayne and

Maria and Maria's family. It's likely that there is a high level of uncertainty among all parties involved; and this uncertainty contributes to a strained or tense relationship. Not only does this theory help us describe the relationship between Maria and Dwayne and Maria's family, but it can also be *explained* by uncertainty theory.

The second primary function of theory is explanation. A good theory should *explain* how and why a phenomenon behaves a certain way. As uncertainty is reduced, liking is typically increased. Perhaps Maria's family has never taken the initiative to get to know Dwayne and understand the relationship between Maria and Dwayne. Maria's family may have never tried to understand why Maria and Dwayne are in love and committed to one another. Because they never communicated in a way that would enable them to understand Dwayne and Maria's relationship, uncertainty remains high and liking remains low. So, how might this uncertainty impact the future relationship of Maria and Dwayne with Maria's family? What do you think would happen if the communication among family members never increases and uncertainty remains high?

If you guessed that Maria's family will never support the relationship between Dwayne and Maria and will continue to be dissatisfied, you have applied the third function of theory—prediction. **Prediction** refers to forecasting what will happen to a phenomenon under certain circumstances. Based on uncertainty reduction theory, we can predict that under the current circumstances (high uncertainty, low levels of communication), Maria's family will continue to dislike the relationship between Maria and Dwayne. Only in the event that the circumstances change will Maria's family accept and appreciate the couple. If Maria, Dwayne, and/or Maria's family knew about uncertainty reduction theory, or at least knew that an increase in communication may reduce uncertainty and a decrease in uncertainty could increase liking, might be able to control the relational development.

The final purpose of theory is control. **Control** may be described as using explanation and prediction to direct the action(s) of a phenomenon. The ability to explain what is happening and predict future events provides for the function of control, which can be powerful. Perhaps if Dwayne and Maria could explain why Maria's family disapproves of their relationship and could predict how future relations among family members would play out, they might be able to better control the situation. As you can see, theories serve several important functions that ultimately help us work through situations we encounter. Different theories help us in different ways. Theories are grounded in a variety of traditions, called paradigms, and each is based on differing assumptions. Therefore, it is prudent to briefly look at the philosophies in which are theories are grounded.

Theoretical Perspectives

Paul and Charlotte are a married couple who frequently create theories about the way things should work in their household. For instance, Paul often argues that

efficiency in housework is the best way to go, while Charlotte argues that housework should be done thoroughly, even if it takes more time. Which theory is correct? Is either theory correct? Paul and Charlotte created their theories about housework based on different assumptions. They don't always think alike, and neither do social scientific scholars. A **theoretical paradigm** is a mode of thought shared by scholars. Just as couples do not share the same ideas on how to tackle housework, not all scholars think alike when it comes to their approaches to research. The approach a researcher subscribes to, however, is important. The approach chosen in one's research endeavors often offers insight into beliefs about the nature of truth (epistemology), the nature of choice (ontology), and values (axiology). The intellectual tradition (perspective) of the scholar, then, ultimately influences the way research is approached. In the next section, we review three fundamental paradigms in communication studies: objective, interpretive, and critical.

Objective Approach

The **objective approach**, also referred to as the positivistic or empirical approach, refers to the belief that objective truths exist, and we research to discover said truths. The objective researcher strives to keep the research value neutral, and control is important in the research process to avoid several possible explanations for a set of results. For instance, a researcher investigating the relationship between depression and infidelity in romantic relationships would work hard to treat all romantic relationships similarly and control for all possible reasons for infidelity other than depression. This way, the results discovered could be generalized to all romantic couples who have experienced infidelity. Objective scholars often make every effort to create general laws that can be used to direct and generalize human behavior. This is no easy task!

Interpretive Approach

In contrast to the objective tradition, there is the **interpretive approach**, which has also been referred to as the hermeneutic tradition. Interpretive scholars believe that the nature of truth is subjective and is socially constructed by humans. Because truth is subjective, there is no desire to generalize research findings as in the objective tradition. Because the researcher socially creates truths just as the participants of a research study do, interpretive scholars believe values are an important part of the research process and there is no need to remain objective. While control and the ability to generalize are important to objective researchers, interpretive scholars are more focused on gaining a deep, descriptive understanding of human phenomena.

Critical Approach

The last approach we will address is called the critical approach. The **critical approach** to research focuses on the role of power in human interaction. Critical

scholars seek an understanding of how ideology pervades communication. An **ideology** is an assumption that persons who hold power shape communication, and thus knowledge, in such a way that those who have power remain in power and those who lack power do not gain it; people with power perpetuate the status quo. Critical theorists advocate emancipation for those who do not have power, including minorities, muted groups, and persons oppressed in any way. Moreover, critical theorists strive for liberation and raising awareness of present ideologies.

The Meaning of 'Truth'

While there are other paradigms within the social sciences, the objective, interpretive, and critical traditions are the most widely recognized. What makes a line of research objective, interpretive, or critical is not so much the topic of study as the goal of the research. In other words, what is the researcher trying to find? Further, how should one go about researching human communication? Depending on the paradigm a researcher subscribes to, the quest to discover truth differs. Each tradition has a different meaning of *truth* and different ideas on the best way to search for the truth. Meanings of truth are considered **metatheoretical assumptions**—or theories about theoretical assumptions. There are three metatheoretical assumptions inherent in all theory: epistemology, ontology, and axiology.

Epistemology

To begin, epistemology centers on the discovery of truth. In other words, epistemology begs the question, "How do we know what we know?" One's **epistemology** centers on the discovery of one overarching truth about reality versus the creation of multiple realities. While some researchers believe in a singular truth—there is one truth out there and we research so we can learn what that truth is; others believe in multiple realities or truths—this is the notion that we socially construct our own truth regarding phenomena. In other words, is knowledge simply out there to observe or is it socially constructed through our communication with others?

Think of your family communication class. What is the climate of the class? Do you feel free to joke around and engage in class discussion? Is the class formal and students only speak when requested to speak? Now, is there one truth regarding what a classroom climate is, or can each class socially create its own climate via interactions of students and teachers? Is there one truth about how college classrooms generally operate, or are there different truths? These questions refer to epistemology, or one's view of the nature of truth in reality.

Ontology

Ontology centers on human nature. Do humans make their own choices (free will), or are we biologically wired in some way? In other words, the focus of ontology is

on determinism versus free will. Consider the role of ontology in our interactions with family members.

Axiology

Finally, the **axiology** refers to one's values of objectivity versus emancipation. Stated differently, what role, if any, do values play in research? Some scholars believe that social scientific inquiry should aim to be value-free (objective), while others believe one's values play an important role in research.

Like many things in life, there is no such thing as a perfect theory. Theories about human communication can never be proven to be true because there are no black and white answers to questions of human behavior. Thus, we must have some way to evaluate the theories we use in our research. In the next section, we review common evaluation criteria for communication theories. Remember, not all theories seek the same understanding; thus, the type of evaluative criteria is contingent on the type of theory being assessed.

Evaluating Theories

Not all theories are created equal! For that reason, it is our job as researchers to evaluate theories. The criteria for theory evaluation depend on the type of theory being evaluated. We have different criteria for objective theories than we do for interpretive theories. Let's begin with the criteria used to evaluate an objective theory.

Objective theories are evaluated using six criteria: explanatory power, prediction, parsimony, testable hypotheses, practical utility, and heurism. Explanatory power, as the name suggests, refers to the ability of a theory to explain behavior. In terms of explanatory power, a theory is considered good or useful if it can effectively explain an event or behavior; a good theory explains *why* something occurs. The second criterion is **prediction**. A theory is considered good or useful when it can predict future events/behavior. Third, we evaluate theories based on **parsimony**. A theory is considered parsimonious when, provided with more than one plausible explanation for the same event/behavior, it presents the simplest explanation. While some events/behaviors are complex, a good theory should not be more intricate than necessary.

Objective theories should include testable hypotheses. In other words, a useful theory should be able to be tested; there must be a way to prove a theory false. Remember, theories can never be "proven" true, but we can, and should, be able to prove them false. Karl Popper (1965) coined the term **falsifiability**, which refers to the idea that a theory must be constructed in such a way that it can be tested and proven false if the theory is, in fact, inaccurate. In addition to falsifiability,

the propositions of the theory must be internally consistent. Put another way, the propositions of the theory cannot contradict one another.

The fourth criterion refers to practical utility. A theory is considered good or useful when it is useful in practical, real-life situations. Theories should provide pragmatic advice for those using the theory to explain and predict future events/behavior. Finally, a theory is considered good or useful when it creates new ideas, ways of thinking, and further research. This is referred to as **heurism**.

Now that we have addressed what a theory is, as well as the criteria used to evaluate theories, let's turn to theories commonly used in family communication research. It's important to note that the following theories do not represent an exhaustive list of communication theories, but rather, some of the most frequently applied theories to explain and understand family interactions. As you study the following theories, think about the strengths and weaknesses of each. Also, think about how the theory can be used to predict, explain, or provide new understanding of family communication.

Theories Commonly Used in Family Communication Research

Systems Theory

Originally advanced by Ludwig von Bertalanffy in 1968, general systems theory states that a system is characterized by the interaction of its elements. Each element is interdependent, mutually influencing every component in the system. The ideas surrounding system interdependence are often applied to the study of family communication. Von Bertalanffy argued that systems are open and interact with their environments through continual evolution. Instead of looking at a given phenomenon (such as a person) among its own properties (that which makes up a person), the emphasis should be on the arrangement of and relationship among parts of the phenomena that make up the whole (such as the family).

Notably, a family system can be described as family members who exert mutual influence over one another in response to their ever-changing environment. **Wholeness** (a key concept in systems theory) is the notion that looking at individual parts in isolation from one another is insufficient when studying a system. To illustrate, think of all your family members. This may include your mother, father, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, or cousins. All the members of your family engage with one another in unique ways constructing your family system. If you wanted to study the entire family as a system, you would not only look at yourself and one other member of your family. That would be insufficient, assuming you have other members included in your family system.

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Further, von Bertalanffy would argue that the parts of your family system are interdependent. **Interdependence** is the idea that a change in one element effects change in the entire system. For example, when one member of a family passes away, this changes the overall context of the family system. One system element, who was once an integral part of the family system, is now gone. This change in the system ultimately changed many family interactions.

Systems, such as families, are hierarchal units. Within the system, there are layered classifications. In many families, the parents hold much of the power. If one's grandparents may be categorized one tier above the parents, that "layer" within the family system also holds power, and so on. In addition, the overall family system is part of a larger societal hierarchy. All systems have boundaries, although some boundaries are open while others are closed. **Open systems** are systems that have permeable boundaries and interact with other systems in the environment. **Closed systems**, by contrast, are systems in which the boundaries are impermeable. For instance, imagine your immediate family spends considerable time with your aunt and uncle's family on a regular basis. Your parents may share parenting responsibilities with your aunt and uncle on your mother's side. Perhaps other extended family members were not nearly as open to sharing homes, parenting tips, or even time spent together. The former example illustrates boundaries that are permeable, and the latter is an example of closed boundaries.

Systems theory is a theory that has shown its usefulness over the years. Further, systems theory is often cited as an exemplary tool for understanding a family system with all its interdependent parts. As we discussed earlier in this chapter, however, no theory is without limitations. One criticism of this theory is that while systems theory adequately focuses on the system as a whole, there is a lack of focus on the individual. When focusing on specific patterns of a system, individual and unpredictable behaviors do not receive much attention.

Symbolic Interactionism

> **Billy:** *"Dad, I got an A on my Math test!"*
> **Dad:** *"That's great, Billy! We should celebrate!"*
> **Billy:** *"I was thinking as a reward I can get the new iPad mini."*
> **Dad"** *"I was thinking as a reward we would go out for ice cream after dinner."*

Think about your own family dinners. How do you interact with one another? Do you make a lot of jokes? Poke fun at one another? Recap your daily activities? The climate and tone of your family dinners are created by the communication that takes place around your dinner table. Because your family interactions are likely different than that of other families, your family dinners are unique. Theorists would argue that your family socially constructs—via interaction—the atmosphere you think of when you think about your family dinnertime.

Symbolic interaction theory was originally created by George Herbert Mead to explain how our interactions with others shape our interpretations of the world and our perceptions of self. It wasn't until after his death in 1934 that Mead's students published his lectures and shared his theory on the impact of messages we receive from others. **Symbolic interaction** is defined as the ways in which we assign meaning to and perceive ourselves and our world as a result of our communication with others. One's family of origin plays an influential role in shaping self perception. Messages of encouragement or support can enhance one's esteem and confidence, while hostile or hurtful communication has the potential to create a perception of worthless.

There are three primary principles of symbolic interactionism. The first principle is meaning. It is through *meaning* that reality is socially constructed. In other words, people behave toward others based on the meaning they have assigned to reality. What do you think of when you hear the word "sensitive"? If you were told that someone is sensitive, it is likely that you would behave toward that person differently than you would if interacting with someone who is not considered sensitive. Very often, we communicate with others in a way that reflects meaning that has been assigned to the reality.

The second principle of symbolic interactionism is language. *Language* is the source of meaning that arises from the interaction between and among people. As humans, we have the ability to name things. For example, your family has probably created names for family members or events. Grandma may be referred to as "Ga" or "Nana" or the summer family reunion may be referred to as the Fortney Follies. Based on names, we can symbolically communicate with others. The final principle of this theory is thought. *Thought* refers to the idea that a person's ability to use language and interpret meaning is moderated through his or her own process of thought. Every person's ability to use language and interpret meaning is unique. Moreover, your thought process differs from the thought process of your siblings or parents or friends. Because we have different thought processes, if someone

identifies a person as "sensitive," we may interpret that symbol differently. While you may expect the person to be emotionally unstable, someone else may ascribe a meaning to sensitive as caring and supportive.

Our thought processes, according to symbolic interactionism, include the third principle of symbolic interaction theory which is minding. Minding is an inner conversation with one's self and involves thinking or planning out the interactions or behaviors to ourselves. If someone tells you that Aunt Chloe is sensitive, you use minding to plan or rehearse how you will address a conversation about a controversial topic with her.

As you have probably noticed, the three principles of symbolic interactionism are not mutually exclusive. Rather, meaning, language, and thought are interconnected. It is through the use of language, thoughts, and meaning that we socially interact and create realities with family members. The most fundamental entity in this process, however, is the role of the self.

The self in communication is in-and-of-itself an important part of the study of communication. The self influences how we perceive others, actions, and events. While you may think of your "self" as a single unit, Mead (1934) argued that the self is actually comprised of two parts: "I" and "Me." The **I** is the spontaneous part of the self that is responsible for the chaotic and unpredictable behaviors. Conversely, the **Me** is the idea that humans have the ability to consider the perspective of another and view themselves objectively. The *Me* is the objective viewpoint one sees when considering the self from the other person's point of view. Have you ever resisted the temptation to engage in an impulsive act that you knew would upset or disappoint your parents? The *I* is the part of you that initially wants to engage in the behavior, and the *Me* is the self that pauses to consider the implications of your actions.

Another key component of this theory is the concept of the generalized other. The **generalized other** refers to the overall mental image one has of his or her self based on what are believed to be community expectations. For example, your family and teachers may hold high expectations for your academic achievement. Throughout your high school years, they probably encouraged and praised your academic pursuits. You know that earning a college degree is viewed very favorably by both your family and your teachers. As a result of the supportive messages that have revealed their expectations for your academic pursuits, you are now pursuing your college degree. The expectations of your parents and teachers have influenced your generalized view of self. Charles Cooley (1902) coined the term **looking-glass self** to further describe what happens when one considers the perceptions held by others. We may stop and reflect on how others perceive our behavior before acting. Will they be impressed or disappointed? Will they view us favorably or unfavorably? These are considerations that influence our looking-glass self.

The theory of symbolic interactionism is credited with providing insight into how humans socially create symbolic messages. The principles of meaning, language, and thought explain how humans work together to socially create the reality in which we live. While Mead's ideas have contributed to our understanding of how others influence our perception of the self, his theory is not without criticism. One criticism is that it is not easily summarized. Because of the overlapping concepts included in symbolic interactionism, many perceive the theory as difficult to understand. Several of the concepts are ambiguous, making the theory broad. Perhaps because Mead's ideas were put together by his students instead of being explained by Mead himself, there are gaps in his original work.

Relational Dialectics Theory

When Grace first went away to college, she felt torn when family issues surfaced. Grace enjoyed the freedom of being away at school, yet missed her family dearly. She often longed for family dinners, with home-cooked meals, joking around with her siblings. At the same time, Grace liked being able to eat with her friends at whatever time she wanted. She didn't have to be home for dinner at any set time, and could choose to eat anything she liked. Grace enjoyed the autonomy she had to make her own decisions, but missed the connection with her family that was reinforced every evening at dinner.

Feeling tensions is common in interpersonal relationships. Leslie Baxter (1988) advanced the relational dialectics theory to explain these tensions. Based on the theory, relational partners experience **dialectical tensions** (being pulled in opposite directions simultaneously), causing a constant state of flux. Dialectical tensions are the feelings of contradictory tendencies within relationships. There are three primary dialectical tensions proposed in the theory. The first is the connectedness-separateness tension. When involved in a relationship, we often desire a feeling of connectedness with a relational partner. At the same time, we may feel the need for independence or separateness. As indicated in the example about Grace missing family dinners, she thrived on being independent from her family while away at school. Yet, simultaneously, Grace missed the connection with her family.

The second dialectical tension is experienced by family members is certainty-uncertainty. The certainty-uncertainty tension often occurs when relationships are predictable. This assurance is often comforting for family members. At the same time, however, relational partners may frequently long for novelty to spice up the relationship so the relationship does not seem boring.

A final dialectical tension experienced by families is openness-closedness. The openness-closedness tension refers to feelings of an obligation within a relationship to self-disclose to a relational partner. Many times, however, people feel a need for privacy on certain issues. Family members may struggle with how much information to self-disclose to one another and how much to keep private. Have you ever debated what information to share with your parents or to keep to yourself?

Perhaps you feared complete disclosure would get you into trouble? If you have ever dealt with such a struggle, you have experienced the openness-closedness tension.

Though dialectical tensions are a natural part of relationships, tension is discomforting. Thus, we look for ways to cope with dialectical tensions. There are four common coping strategies. The first is cyclic alternation. **Cyclic alternation** includes alternating with each opposite end at differing times. Grace often satisfied her need for connection by visiting home and having dinner with her family once a month, while having autonomy on the other days when she stayed at school. A second strategy is used when we satisfy each of the contradictory tensions in separate contexts of our relational life. This is called **segmentation**. Natalia and Jessica may choose to manage the dialectical tension of separateness/connecteness by segmenting activities into categories of social and task. Time together may focus on tasks that they need to accomplish around their home, such as painting or gardening. Each of them spends a "night out" with friends once a week to enable them to fulfill their need for autonomy. **Selection** occurs when we choose one of the two opposite ends, and satisfy one need or the other. Recall our earlier example where you must decide how much information to share with your parents. If you decide that you will always tell your parents everything no matter the punishment or disappointment, you have selected to focus on openness and to ignore the tension of closedness. The final coping strategy is considered the best option by many, but it's also the most difficult to implement. **Integration** involves adjusting your perception of the opposing tensions in one of three ways: neutralizing, reframing, or disqualifying.

Neutralizing is a compromise between the opposite ends. For instance, as Grace becomes more comfortable at college she returns home for family dinners less frequently. While she wants to become more autonomous, her parents feel that she is disengaging from her family. Grace may use the neutralizing tactic to preserve the relationship with her parents by going home for family dinners every other week as opposed to every week, which would be her parents' preference. Another common strategy is reframing. **Reframing** is when a person cognitively reframes the opposites so they no longer appear to be in opposition to one another. Grace may reframe her perception of the dialectical tension between separateness and connectedness by telling her friends how fortunate she is to live close enough to her family to be able to eat dinner with them whenever she chooses. Last, there is disqualifying. **Disqualifying** includes choosing one opposite as the general pattern in the relationship, while ignoring the existence of the other. Grace may justify her decision to stop going home for dinner by deciding that it's time "to grow up" and experience life on her own. She may further justify her decision by rationalizing that her parents are "overprotective."

What dialectal tensions have you experienced in your family? Do you consider your brother or sister to be your best friend, yet it seems that you argue constantly? Do you get bored with the same old family events, yet long for the

comfort of family? One of the positives of this interpretive theory is that it provides a new understanding of people and has aesthetic appeal. Because the theory lacks explanatory and predictive power, however, some scholars argue relational dialectics theory should not even be labeled a theory. In light of the positives and negatives of this theory, family scholars continue to study interactions using this theory to better understand the dialectical tensions experienced by family members and unique strategies for managing the oppositions to preserve the family relationship.

Rules Theory

Unlike systems theory, symbolic interactionism, or even relational dialectics theory, rules theory is a useful, yet simple theory. The first research on rules in personal relationships is credited to Donald Cushman (1977). Based on his work, rules theory suggests that all relationships are governed by a set of rules. Shimanoff defines a **rule** as "a followable prescription that indicates what behavior is obligated, preferred, or prohibited in certain contexts" (1980, p. 57). If the rules within a relationship are upheld, the relationship is more likely to continue. If the relational rules are broken, the relationship deteriorates and possibly terminates. While it is more difficult to terminate an obligatory relationship such as a family relationship, the bonds among family members can and do deteriorate. If honesty is a family rule, and someone in the family breaks that rule, the bonds among family members may be weakened.

Rules theory is easy to understand. For this reason, the theory is commonly applied to family situations. One criticism of rules theory is that it does not explain complex situations in which rules are broken but the relationship is sustained. For instance, a family member who constantly lies and takes advantage of other family

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members may break the family rules time and again. If this person remains an important part of the family unit, rules theory may not fully explain or predict future behavior. What are some of the rules in your family? What happens when a family member breaks a rule?

Narrative Theory

Narrative theory (also referred to as the narrative paradigm) was initially advanced by Walter Fisher in 1984. Fisher believed that humans are inherently storytelling beings. We make sense of our world through the use of stories. Think of your family history. You may have family stories that have been passed on from generation to generation. Often we sustain our family history through storytelling, or narration. Fisher (1984) defines **narration** as symbolic actions/words that have sequence and meaning for those who live, speak, or interpret them. Because this definition is so broad, it supports Fisher's contention that all communication is storytelling. He argued that we are constantly telling stories in our communication with one another. Related to narration is our use of phatic communication. **Phatic communication** is communication with the goal of establishing and maintaining relationships as opposed to exchanging superficial information. If someone asked you what your family was like, you might tell a story or two to give your listener an idea of what your family is like. As opposed to placing an order for pizza or cashing a check at the bank, sharing family narratives may be used to establish and maintain relationships.

Fisher (1984) defines a paradigm as a conceptual framework and claims that narrative theory is more than a theory; it is a theoretical framework that explains our communication with others. Specifically, he argued that narration is the best way to appeal to one's sense of reason. Unfortunately, not all stories are created equal. Therefore, we must have criteria to effectively evaluate stories. The two criteria include narrative coherence and narrative fidelity. **Narrative coherence** refers to the degree to which the details in a story fit together. Put another way, narrative coherence speaks to the internal consistency of a story. When the pieces are put together, do they make sense? **Narrative fidelity** is the degree to which a story matches one's beliefs and real-life experiences.

Think of the film *Forrest Gump*. In the movie, Forrest Gump tells remarkable stories of his life experiences. Some of the stories were so remarkable, however, that some may have found them to be unbelievable. Some of the stories told by Forrest in the film did not match real-life experiences of most people. To them, the stories may have been lacking in narrative fidelity. Even if a story has narrative coherence, it does not always meet the standard of narrative fidelity. Communication through storytelling makes sense to most people. Therefore, one of the most cited advantages of the theory is that it is easy to understand. While some criticize Fisher's definition of narration for being broad, narrative theory continues to be a favorite theory of family communication studies.

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Social Cognitive Theory

Based on social learning theory, social cognitive theory is a theory of learning which proposes that humans model behaviors of others through observation. Originally developed by Albert Bandura (1971), social cognitive theory is one of the most well-known theories of learning, and it has been frequently applied to family studies. Similar to social learning theory, social cognitive theory is based on the idea that people model the behaviors of others. **Vicarious learning** is the idea that people can learn from watching others enact a certain behavior. Such imitation of models can be interpersonal or mass mediated, so we may model the behaviors of our parents or people we see on television or in movies. Picture a child learning to walk, run, and communicate. Often they model the behavior of their parents, who teach them how to wave hello or goodbye, walk, or even give hugs and kisses. Humans learn from each other, and quickly learn to model the behavior of others.

This learning, however, is a process. There are four basic steps in the modeling process (Bandura, 1971). The first step is the attention step. **Attention** is when a person attends to the behavior of a model. We first have to select which behaviors we want to model. We cannot model every behavior of every person we observe in our lifetime, so we choose which ones to attend to or not. Next is the retention step. **Retention** refers to the need for a person to retain the previously attended-to information. Once the information has been selected and retained we move on the third step, **motor reproduction**. A person must be able to reproduce the behavior. When motor reproduction takes place, that child can now perform the behavior modeled by the parent. Finally, motivation is a key step in the process. **Motivation** refers to a person's desire to perform the behavior. Learning is most likely to occur when a person identifies with the model. When we can relate to or identify with a model, we are more motivated to perform the behavior.

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Finally, self-efficacy is an important factor in the modeling process. **Self-efficacy** may be defined as the belief one has that he or she can perform a certain behavior and/or reach a certain goal. Consider a young boy who has eagerly wanted to learn to play basketball. The boy's father, a talented basketball player, teaches him how to play. After several years, the young boy begins to model his father's behavior. The boy believes that, with practice, he could eventually model his dad's behavior and play ball well. This belief that he could succeed indicated that he had a high level of self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy makes the role of the "self" central in human behavior, and is often regarded as a positive aspect of social cognitive theory. In addition, vicarious learning has been shown to be a useful tool in many teaching contexts, including the family setting. Criticisms of this theory include the belief that the theory is complicated. Also, some argue that it is possible for people to learn negative behaviors as well as positive behaviors, so this theory could explain how we teach others to behave in unconstructive ways.

Summary

In this chapter we have defined theory and reviewed the four primary purposes of theories: description, explanation, prediction, and control. You should now have a basic understanding of the three major theoretical perspectives/paradigms—objective, interpretive, and critical. In addition, you can now describe epistemology, ontology, and axiology—or the metatheoretical assumptions of theories, and use the criteria to evaluate theories to effectively critique communication theories. The majority of this chapter was dedicated to the explanation and application of several theories (systems theory, family communication patterns theory, symbolic interactionism, relational dialectics theory, rules theory, narrative theory, and social cognitive theory) prevalent in family communication research.

With such a foundation of family communication theory, you should be better able to understand and explain your own family interactions. Additionally, you should be able to apply a few of the theories presented in this chapter to explain the case study about Dwayne and Maria. In the next several chapters we focus on specific topics that pervade our family life including conflict, violence, and abuse as well as the role of technology in family communication. In all the research that you will read, communication theory has been used as a foundation. As you read the next several chapters, apply at least one theory learned in this chapter.

Let's Review

- How do you define theory? What are the primary purposes of a theory?
- How is theory used in family communication research?
- What are the three theoretical paradigms?
- What is a metatheoretical assumption?
- What do epistemology, axiology, and ontology tell us about the theoretical perspective?
- What does narrative theory tell us about the power of storytelling?
- How are families like systems? What happens when one part of the system ceases to work?
- What are some family communication patterns your family has created over the years? Were those patterns passed on from generation to generation? How?
- How do our families' symbolic interactions create the social reality of our families? How can such a reality be altered?
- Name three behaviors you learned by modeling family members. Why did you choose to model these behaviors? What behaviors do you engage in that you would like others to model?

Key Concepts

Attention A person attends to the behavior of a model.

Axiology One's values of objectivity versus emancipation.

Closed systems Systems in which the boundaries are impermeable.

Control Using explanation and prediction to direct the action(s) of a phenomenon.

Critical approach This approach to research focuses on the role of power in human interaction.

Cyclic alternation Alternating with each opposite end at differing times.

Description Before we can understand how and/or why something works, we must be able to provide a description; "a process of using symbols to represent phenomena" (Wood, 2004, p. 32).

Dialectical tensions Being pulled in opposite directions simultaneously.

Disqualifying Choosing one opposite as the general pattern in the relationship, providing exceptions to the rule.

Epistemology Centers on the discovery of one overarching truth about reality versus the creation of multiple realities.

Falsifiability The idea that all theories must be constructed in such a way that that can be tested and proven false if the theory is, in fact, inaccurate.

Generalized other The overall mental image one has of his or her self based on what is believed to be community expectations.

Heurism A theory is considered good or useful when it creates new ideas, ways of thinking, and further research.

I The spontaneous part of the self responsible for the chaotic and unpredictable behaviors of the self.

Ideology The assumption that persons who hold power shape communication, and thus knowledge, in such a way that those who have power remain in power and those lacking power do not gain it; people with power perpetuate the status quo.

Integration Integrating opposite tensions in one of three ways: neutralizing, re-framing, disqualifying.

Interpretive approach Focuses on the role of power in human interaction.

Interdependence A change in one element effects change in the entire system.

Looking-glass self Charles Cooley: When one takes the role of the other, the looking glass self is the resulting mental self-image (Cooley, 1902).

Me Humans are able to take the role of another and view themselves objectively; the Me is the objective self one may see when viewing the self from the role of the other.

Metatheoretical assumptions Theories about theoretical assumptions.

Motivation A person must have the desire to perform the behavior.

Motor reproduction A person must be able to reproduce the behavior.

Narration Symbolic actions—words and/or deeds—that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them.

Narrative coherence The degree to which a story hangs together; internal consistency.

Narrative fidelity The degree to which a story matches one's beliefs and real-life experiences.

Neutralizing Compromise between the opposite ends.

Objective approach The belief that objective truths exist, and we research to discover said truths.

Ontology Centers on human nature, determinism and free will.

Open systems Systems that have permeable boundaries and interact with other systems in the environment.

Parsimony A good theory, when provided with more than one plausible explanation for the same event/behavior, presents the simplest explanation.

Phatic communication Communication with the goal of establishing and maintaining relationships as opposed to exchanging superficial information.

Prediction Forecasting what will happen to a phenomenon under certain circumstances.

Reframing Cognitively reframe the opposites so they no longer appear to be in opposition to one another.

Retention A person must retain the information that has been attended to.

Rule A prescribed pattern of behavior that is expected, allowed, or forbidden in a given context.

Segmentation Focus on each of the opposite ends within different contexts.

Selection Choosing one of the two opposite ends.

Self-efficacy The belief one has that he or she can perform a certain behavior and/or reach a certain goal.

Symbolic interaction The use of symbols to communicate.

Theoretical paradigm A mode of thought shared by scholars.

Theory A system of statements logically linked that may be used to explain, predict, and understand human phenomena.

Vicarious learning The idea that people can learn from watching others enact a certain behavior; learning through modeling.

Wholeness The notion that looking at individual parts in isolation from one another is insufficient when studying a system.

Video

In the popular movie *Marley & Me* (2008), starring Owen Wilson (John Grogan) and Jennifer Aniston (Jennifer Grogan), a newspaper writer and his wife move to Florida. John and Jennifer begin as a married couple with no children. Because John is not ready to have children, he buys a puppy (Marley) for Jennifer. Marley, the 100-pound dog, tries everyone's patience in this romantic comedy. As the movie progresses, they add two children to the family. This film offers several junctures of family creation by which the theories common to the study of family communication may be used to explicate the plot.

- Using symbolic interactionism theory, do John and Jennifer share meaning with regards to the family pet, Marley? How do they construct their own definition of "family?"
- What are some of the rules in John and Jennifer's family? How do these rules impact their family communication?
- Do John and Jennifer experience any dialectical tensions? How do they cope with tension experienced?

Application Activity

Review relational dialectics theory. Create one scenario (this may be either real or fictional) for each of the dialectical tensions that may be experienced in a family. Following an explanation of a possible scenario highlighting each tension, determine which coping strategy would work best for that scenario.

Reflection on Research

Article: Koerner, A. F. & Fitzpatrick, M. A. (2002). Toward a theory of family communication. *Communication Theory*, *12*, 70–91.

In this research, Koerner and Fitzpatrick develop a theory of family communication which is relational in nature. They address complex issues surrounding family communication and focus specifically on family relational schema.

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