



Perspectives on Teaching the Family Communication Course

Tiffany R. Wang and Jeffrey T. Child

Keywords: family communication, instruction, pedagogy, teaching

Abstract: This article discusses what undergraduate students enrolled in a family communication course should learn. It is intended to provide readers with a general direction on how to design or teach a family communication course so that students understand a communication-centered approach to family. This article highlights some of the foundational theories and concepts grounding most family communication courses, content areas typically addressed when considering the family communication course, possible assignments that might be useful in teaching the course, and relevant issues related to teaching family communication. If instructors thoughtfully consider content and assignment decisions in the family communication course, they have the potential to help students think about family communication in more nuanced and informed ways as they navigate family bonds as scholars and practitioners.

Family interaction is foundational to how people think about the interface of others and themselves in society. Parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and families (in all its varied forms and configurations) socialize the interaction norms that individuals carry into different types of relationships throughout life. Family bonds are among the longest lasting types of connections formed with others throughout life. This article highlights some of the foundational theories and concepts grounding most family communication courses, content areas typically addressed when considering the family communication course, possible assignments that might be useful in teaching the course, and relevant issues related to teaching family communication.

Tiffany R. Wang, University of Montevallo, Montevallo, AL

Jeffrey T. Child, Kent State University, Kent, OH

CONTACT: twang@montevallo.edu

Foundations

A diverse range of theories can be useful to understanding the interaction patterns that occur in families. In fact, the most recent edition of Braithwaite, Suter, and Floyd's (2018) edited family communication theories book highlights 29 theories that have a significant body of work in application to the study of family communication practices that might ground a family communication course. Thus, one of the joys in teaching this course is that two family communication courses might look dramatically different based upon the theories chosen to serve as a foundation for the course.

One way to decide which theories to include in the course might come from examining the published literature. Braithwaite et al. (2018) noted in their most recent analysis that from 2004 through 2015, the most commonly applied theories in the family communication area include communication privacy management theory, family communication patterns theory, relational dialectics theory, narrative theories, systems theory, and attachment theory. Grounding the family communication course in these six theoretical perspectives provides a snapshot of what is unique about family communication. Understanding family interaction requires exploration of dialogue and storytelling; power dynamics; and individual, dyadic, group, and system-based factors that shape and explain family interactions. Instructors should build a theoretical understanding of family communication among students that allows for the situating of family interactions through multiple meta-theoretical commitments, including post-positivist theories, interpretive theories, and critical theories (Braithwaite et al.). Another way to think about which theories might be privileged or deemphasized in family communication is to review the theories covered in related courses (e.g., interpersonal communication, communication theory) as a way to reduce redundancy in curriculum overall.

Beyond theory, students taking a family communication course should have an increased understanding about the diversity and complexity of what currently constitutes family communication and some of the unique communication-based issues that occur in different types of families. Such discussions begin by considering definitional issues for families grounded in biology, legality, relational choices, social construction perspectives, and discourse-dependence approaches (Turner & West, 2015). There is no widely agreed upon definition of the term “family” or a universal lens through which people consider family for the purposes of unpacking communication. Some of the family types that students should leave the course understanding better from a communication perspective include two-parent biological families, committed partners, single-parent families, solo parent, stepfamilies, gay and lesbian families, adoptive families, foster families, extended or intergenerational families, and self-defined families (Dorrance Hall & Scharp, in press; Galvin, Braithwaite, Schrod, & Bylund, 2019; Segrin & Flora, 2019; Turner & West, 2018).

Content Areas

After students develop a strong understanding of the foundations of the family communication course, students can use what they have learned about defining, creating, and theorizing about family to examine several general content areas. The varied family communication textbooks (e.g., Dorrance Hall & Scharp, in press; Galvin et al., 2019; Segrin & Flora, 2019; Turner & West, 2018) each take a slightly different approach to topics covered across a typical 15-week semester. For example, some textbooks embed issues of media, technology, and family communication across the entire textbook whereas other textbooks devote an entire chapter to the topic. No textbook is likely to address all possible content that could be covered, and it may be helpful to supplement the text with content from one or more of the areas listed below from other resources.

Across textbooks, some topics most consistently covered include culture and creating a family identity (e.g., relational cultures, communication patterns, societal influence, religion/spirituality), storytelling (e.g., functions of storytelling, types of family stories, rituals, and storytelling), and intimacy (e.g., commitment, disclosure, sexuality). Textbooks also cover roles and rules (e.g., role functions, gender and roles, role appropriation, types of family rules), power and influence (e.g., decision-making, violence in families), stress and conflict (e.g., process, factors, unresolved conflict, destructive conflict, constructive conflict, unpredictable stress, family coping patterns, crises), and well-being (e.g., physical well-being, difficult conversations). Consistently covered topics also include media and technology (e.g., televised messages about family, consumption of media, social media, technology and media access in the home) and the future of family communication (e.g., issues of diversity, multicultural families, understudied families, poverty and homelessness).

Applied Assignments

Family communication is an easy topic to get students out of the classroom interacting with others in meaningful ways. One assignment that does this is having students engage in an informed interview assignment. This assignment can be completed in three stages throughout the semester. First, students explore the literature on one family communication-based topic in the course and develop potential interview questions based on that literature. Then, students interview three generations of the same family on their topic of interest and develop three to five themes reflecting the most interesting insights from those interviews. Third, students write a final section that brings together diverse perspectives on research and practice related to their topic. Students can consider how the literature review and interviews confirm, contradict, and extend one another. Asking students to reflect on how the assignment has expanded their own understanding of family communication is a good way to synthesize the course content.

Some tips can make this semester-long interview assignment more productive. Telling students to be strategic in their selection of a family who will allow a deeper nuanced understanding of their topic is helpful to gain more substantial dialogue and possible perspective taking in interviews. Students often need help constructing descriptive interview questions that get others sharing perspectives and stories while centering a communication approach to their topic of interest rather than a psychological, sociological, family studies, or gender studies approach.

Another applied assignment that highlights the aforementioned foundations and content areas is a family sitcom analysis of classic or contemporary television sitcoms (e.g., *The Brady Bunch*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, *The Fosters*, *Modern Family*). This assignment could include a paper or oral presentation that can be completed individually or as a group assignment. Students should view three to five episodes per sitcom and apply relevant content areas to specific examples taken from the sitcom in either a written or oral analysis. Potential content areas include the systems perspective, family communication patterns, meanings and rules, conflict, intimacy, family roles, or power and decision-making. Students who are asked to compare and contrast two sitcoms from different time periods also trace how these sitcoms reflect how the ways in which individuals define and create family have changed over time.

Issues to Consider

One critical issue for instructors is keeping student contributions and perspectives consistently centered on examining communication within families rather than providing prescriptive solutions for family problems that students may experience in their lives or drifting to discussion of issues

that do not center a communicative approach to understanding family. Instructors also should seek to cultivate a confidential and welcoming environment where students feel comfortable sharing their family experiences. Although family communication foundations and content areas often lead to rich discussion, instructors should caution students that family communication is not designed to replace counseling or therapy, and that self-disclosure about family experiences is voluntary. Often, family communication instructors are not trained counselors or therapists. If difficult topics arise that require counseling or therapy, instructors should direct and encourage students to use helpful resources on campus that allow them to engage with trained practitioners.

Family communication often is an upper-division elective; thus, in some cases, students may be unprepared for the course. Whereas students from multiple disciplines take the course, providing scaffolding for learning about foundational communication principles may be helpful to those students who are less familiar with communication theory. Balancing helpful scaffolding with challenging students who have extensive background in communication studies can prove difficult. Students outside of the discipline taking family communication as an elective course may be more interested in the application or practice of family communication rather than the theory of family communication. Highlighting theory, application, and practice are important to a successful family communication course. Another approach to this issue is requiring a prerequisite course before the senior-level class, such as interpersonal communication.

Conclusion

Instructors should ground the family communication course in theories and concepts that reflect the richness and complexity of family interaction, explore content areas that highlight the diversity of family communication, design applied assignments that encourage students to merge theory and practice, and remain mindful of potential issues that might arise in the classroom. If instructors thoughtfully consider content and assignment decisions in the family communication course, they have the potential to help students think about family communication in more nuanced and informed ways as they navigate family bonds as both scholars and practitioners.

References

- Braithwaite, D. O., Suter, E. A., & Floyd, K. (2018). The landscape of meta-theory and theory in family communication research. In D. Braithwaite, E. Suter, & K. Floyd (Eds.), *Engaging theories in family communication: Multiple perspectives* (2nd ed., pp. 1–16). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Dorrance Hall, E., & Scharp, K. M. (in press). *Communication in family contexts: Applying theories and processes to family relationships*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Galvin, K. M., Braithwaite, D. O., Schrodt, P., & Bylund, C. L. (2019). *Family communication: Cohesion and change* (10th ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Segrin, C., & Flora, J. (2019). *Family communication* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Turner, L. H., & West, R. (2015). The challenge of defining “family.” In L. Turner & R. West (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of family communication* (pp. 10–25). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Turner, L. H., & West, R. (2018). *Perspectives on family communication* (5th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education.