What Is the Goal of Defining Family? Best Practices for Teaching Family Communication

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Keywords: definitions, family, values

Abstract: Family Communication is an inherently value-laden class. When students walk into the classroom, some of them come with a very negative view of family, whereas others walk in with an extremely narrow view of family. By prioritizing and facilitating the importance of multiple definitions of families, instructors can move through more complex topics over the course of the semester knowing that students have an understanding of why defining family is important—even if they are hesitant to change their definition. In this article I present eight best practices for teaching family communication. This set of practices provides a foundation for educators to broach a value-laden topic while building classroom rapport.

"Families have long been viewed as among the most essential and universal units of society. This sense of the shared experience of family has led to an often unexamined consensus regarding what exactly constitutes a family." (Franklin, 1990, p. 29)

Introduction

When I was getting my Masters in Communication Studies, I was constantly asked if it was a broadcasting and journalism degree. So when I was working on my PhD I was thrilled that I could tell people I was getting a degree in family communication. Surely that would be something everyone could understand, but I was wrong. The question shifted to "oh so you are going to be a marriage and family therapist." It seemed that regardless of the specificity I attached to my degree title—no one was quite sure what it was I studied. I think it is easy for us to forget that our students, even ones majoring in Communication

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Studies, often do not quite understand what the class is about when they walk in the door—especially when it comes to families. Thus, much of the legwork we do when teaching family communication is explaining what they will and will not get out of this class. Building a strong foundation at the beginning is critical to facilitating a wide array of conversations in the family communication classroom. There are a variety of scholarly readings on "what is family" or defining "family communication," yet students often don't see the value in defining abstract terms outside of the classroom framework. With the diversity of family definitions and the wide reaching implications of those definitions on research, law, clinicians, and policy (Floyd et al., 2006; Franklin, 1990; Galvin, 2006; Medalie & Cole-Kelly, 2002; Smolkat, 2001), learning one textbook definition does a disservice to students and families.

The process of just memorizing one definition for the purposes of the course discourages critical thinking, results in short-term retention of the material, and fails to challenge students (Cox, 2023). Thus, when students are provided with a definition of family without a framework for interrogating that definition, the rest of the course content loses the complexity attached to family communication theories and topics. Focusing on key concepts, such as family "helps to develop understanding by offering opportunities to link, review and put knowledge into context" (Cambridge Assessment International Education Teaching and Learning Team, n.d., para. 24). Thus, careful planning and preparation is needed when approaching what defining family means, regardless of how the course is taught. Given the variety of ways to teach family communication courses (Wang & Child, 2019), it is clear that a set of best practices is needed for laying the foundation of defining family. In the following I present eight best practices for creating a solid yet malleable foundation for the study of families.

Best Practices #1: Construct the Boundaries

Before the class even starts use your LMS platform to introduce yourself, your role in this class, and invite questions. Start by introducing yourself, it helps students understand who you are and gives them the opportunity to know who you consider family. If we expect our students to be vulnerable, we must also be vulnerable in sharing more about our own lives, especially when it comes to families. I find that when teaching family communication, it helps for students to know more about how I grew up and who I consider family on a personal level. Next, establish a foundation for the class by explaining elements of the course. First, I tell students,

> This is a research class, meaning we will talk about a lot of research related to family communication, and we will entertain a lot of "it depends" questions. In other words, families are super complex, and often the answer to your question is "it depends."

Often students walk into classes assuming that there are right and wrong answers because that's what our testing method would suggest; however, with families they vary so much just in the structure alone that there are rarely right answers, but instead better and worse answers. Second, remind students of your role in this class.

> I am not a therapist, I am a researcher and a teacher, and with that comes some information about how I approach this class. I want you to be able to take the information from this class to become a more competent communicator in your current family, your future family, and a more understanding individual as it relates to all things family. What I can promise you is that you will learn a lot in this class, what I can't do is provide quick fixes to family dilemmas.

Too frequently students enter the family communication classroom expecting that it will solve all of their family communication problems and that they can "fix" their family members. The process of establishing what type of class it is and is not also opens the door for questions about the meaning of family and why we are often confronted with "it depends." This is particularly important as students look for family answers in this class in a way they are unlikely to in persuasion or small group communication for example. This personal connection to the course content is what makes the family communication course both easy to connect with and challenging for students to acknowledge what is outside their experience and values.

Best Practice #2: Reflect on Their Own Definition of Family

Prior to any family readings or class discussions about defining family, have students write a brief essay on (1) how they define family, (2) what they view as the essential components of their definition of family, (3) how they define family communication, and the (4) essential components of their definition of family communication. They should complete these essays prior to any reading for class, and they should bring their essays with them to class. This enables them to carefully reflect on how they conceptualize family and family communication free of the constraints of the readings, instructor influence, and peer influence. I find that this also invites more questions and discussion as students come to class ready to provide their definition.

Best Practice #3: (Re)Conceptualize Family

Now that students have had a chance to write their own definition of family and read for class, in class ask them to draw their family tree. They can draw these however and with whomever they want to include or exclude. Tell students that their trees are up to them, and that you have no say over who does or does not get included in the tree. They can draw them as trees, stick figures, portraits, anything goes for this activity. Although students have already written their definition of family, this process asks them to think about family in a different way with a different prompt. I find that students use a different definition of family for this drawing than they do for the written assignment, and they come to realize that even they do not have only one definition of family. This creative process enables students to critically reflect on and (re)conceptualize who they count as family.

Best Practice #4: Challenge Family Definitions

Now that students have their written definition and a drawing of their family, have them compare the two. If their family tree does not match their definition, have them add or remove people to bring their drawing in line with their written definition. The majority of students have to change their drawing in some way to fit their written definition of family. This leads to a discussion about our individual views of family, and how context and the way we are asked about family changes how we think about who is family. This is an opportunity to discuss (1) what they liked about their definitions, (2) how if at all they would change them, and (3) similarities and differences across student definitions. Finally, remind them of the value-laden nature of family, specifically that (1) family often has a very personal meaning, and (2) not everyone sees family as a good or positive thing. This is key for providing a space for students who do not have a positive family experience and reminding students that they all come from a variety of different backgrounds and understanding of family.

Best Practice #5: Scholarship Often Determines Who Counts

Now that students know how they define family, it is time to start thinking about the implications of defining family. "Family becomes whatever family scholars study" (Floyd et al., 2006, p. 22), for all of us who study families this statement can feel very heavy. For students, thinking about how scholars choose to define family impacts what they take from the textbook and the readings. In other words, as researchers we decide who family is by who we study, and for our students this knowledge becomes critical as they consider who we have decided is family in the research presented to them. In the process of helping students to recognize this concept, it also helps them discern what the implications of that definition are for those individuals. Through the process of studying families—each study has the potential to dismiss more discourse dependent families (Galvin, 2006), or perhaps make claims about all families with a mostly white sample (Soliz & Phillips, 2017). This discussion is the perfect introduction for students into both the implication of defining family and the variety of ways that scholars define family.

Best Practice #6: Definition Superstore

Often as faculty we provide students with a singular definition of a concept, and for some things this works, not to mention students like this definitive clarity. However, for complex terms like family—one definition only provides one viewpoint with each definition inherently including some and excluding others. So instead of a niche boutique, we can travel to the definition superstore, where you can find any kind of definition you wish. In the following table, I've provided just a few of the ways in which family has been defined.

TABLE 1	
Family Definitions	
Definition	**Source**
"A multigenerational social system consisting of at least two interdependent people bound together by a common living space (at one time or another) and a common history, and who share some degree of emotional attachment to or involvement with one another"	(Yerby et al., 1994, p. 13)
"An organized, relational transactional group, usually occupying a common living space over an extended time period, and possessing a confluence of interpersonal images that evolve through the exchange of meaning over time"	(Pearson, 1993, p. 14)
"Families as constituted in communication"	(Floyd et al., 2006, p. 23)
"A self-defined group of intimates who create and maintain themselves through their own interactions and their interactions with others; a family may include both voluntary and involuntary relationships; it creates both literal and symbolic internal and external boundaries; and it evolves through time: it has a history, a present, and a future"	(Turner & West, 2002, p. 8)
"Families as constituted in discrete relationships"	(Floyd et al., 2006, p. 23)
"Networks of people who share their lives over long periods of time bound by marriage, blood, or commitment, legal or otherwise, who consider themselves as family and who share a significant history and anticipated future functioning as a family"	(Galvin et al., 2018, p. 8)
"A group of people consisting of one set of parents and their children, whether living together or not"	(*Family, n. & Adj. Meanings, Etymology and More | Oxford English Dictionary*, n.d.)

"A group of two or more people related by blood, marriage or adoption"	(U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1981)
"Traditionally, the law defines a family as a group of individuals related by blood, marriage, or adoption"	(Smolkat, 2001, p. 630)

Note: For a broader view I've included definitions from outside of the field of family communication as well; however, for the purposes of your class discussion you may choose to limit your list.

This list is just a sampling of family definitions, with the medical field acknowledging the value in having multiple types of definitions. For example, the type of definition that holds the most value changes based on the reason for clinical treatment: (1) Census definition (blood, marriage, adoption), (2) biological, (3) household, (4) functional, (5) crisis, (6) bereaved, (7) cultural, and (8) relationship (Medalie & Cole-Kelly, 2002). Moreover, the definitions most commonly used in North America might be limiting when it comes to Indigenous families (Tam et al., 2017) or families with other cultural backgrounds. Thus, how we define families and the definitions we introduce students to carries weight beyond research.

Best Practice #7: Explore the So What

So what? Why should we care about the definition of family beyond the walls of this classroom? At this point students can recognize the variety of definitions of family, and they can see how personally those definitions impact who they consider family. Yet, there is still a disconnect between the various ways we can define family and the impact of those definitions on them personally. One way to address this is to provide students with real-world examples of how definitions of family impact law and policy. I use news stories to illustrate how the way family is defined impacts the way policy is implemented. Below I've included some topics to consider:

- ▶ FMLA rules and how and when they are applied
- ▶ 9/11 survivor benefits
- ▶ Medical privacy starting at age 12
- ▶ Medical decisions and children over the age of 18
- ▶ Supporting aging parents
- ▶ Maternal and baby care for teen moms
- ▶ The Safe Haven law
- ▶ FAFSA and college payment responsibility
- ▶ Adoption and foster care

These are just a few topics to consider when presenting students with news articles. In groups of two to four I give students a news article about a law or policy that is implemented based on a certain definition or understanding of who counts as family. I have found this to be one of the most impactful portions of the semester, as not only do students recognize many ways in which how family is defined has the potential to impact their lives, but also understand the importance of this class as a whole. This process provides the foundation for students to ask hard questions throughout the semester and critically evaluate the material presented to them.

Best Practice #8: Embrace It Depends

All roads lead to "it depends"; there are no quick fixes in family communication, no perfect answers, and despite the patterned behaviors we are able to observe, all families vary. They vary in structure, in role, in identity, and in their communication norms (Phillips & Soliz, 2020). So why bother studying families in the first place? To increase understanding, to continue building on the knowledge we have, and because the complexity of family is what makes them interesting. By the time you have finished making the case for defining family, students can start thinking about why it depends, and how communication behaviors in families might depend, on additional information, such as how racial/ethnic background influences family processes and what constitutes "good" communication behaviors in families.

Conclusion

Although these practices might often feel commonplace, the practice of thinking critically about the terms we use in class, and the structure we provide for them, is often foundational to what students walk away with at the end of the semester. These practices are critical in teaching family communication because it is such a value laden class; however, I hope that instructors in other areas of communication also find value in these practices. They are certainly not limited to only family communication, but have the potential to also be used in a variety of other classes. Whether you are teaching a family communication class, or an organizational communication class—definitions mean something and we need to make sure that our students understand the value and utility in those definitions, above and beyond being able to answer a test question. As we embrace the teacher-scholar model, we must also be able to facilitate that dichotomy for students as they navigate how they have always thought about family and how they might think about it moving forward.

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