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Family as Agency of Potential

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“Families” and “family relationships,” however defined, are foundational communication contexts. In families and family relationships, many communication firsts occur: first nonverbal messages, verbal messages, relational communication episodes, group communication episodes, exposure to mediated communication, and other communicative practices. Beyond initial experiences, the influence of families and family relationships on a person’s communication stretches across the entire life span. Among family members, we experience many of life’s most uplifting, validating, and human moments: celebrations of births, holidays, and anniversaries; episodes of deep connection; moments of triumph; and many more. Conversely, family members also weather together some of life’s most depressing, damaging, and inhuman moments: abuse (physical and emotional), crime, death, illness, mistreatment, poverty, unemployment, and many others, some at the hands of fellow family members. For better or worse, family and family relationships are relational epicenters of daily and long-term human experience.

From the first publications about family communication, pioneering scholars recognized the potential of communication as a force for good and for ill, and, therefore, firmly rooted family communication scholarship in applied, as well as theoretical, soil. Bochner’s (1976) landmark review of the literature—the first family communication article published in a communication journal—cited many marital and family therapists, including Jackson (1965), Satir (1967), and Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967), all of whom recognized the significance of communication to the psychological well-being of family members. A few years later, Galvin and Brommel’s (1982), Family Communication: Cohesion and Change (the communication discipline’s first textbook on that topic), embedded the roots of family communication even deeper in applied soil. As Galvin and Brommel explained:

Within these pages we will present a framework for examining communication within families. By the end of the text you should be able to apply this model to an unknown family and eventually understand that family as a communication system. We also hope that you will apply what you learn to your own family or to the family you eventually form, in order to improve communication among family members. (p. 2; italics added)

In the time since those early publications, family communication researchers have continued to labor on three interrelated fronts, advancing: (1) theoretical understanding of communication in families and family relationships, (2) applied understanding of the role of communication in managing problems in families and family relationships, and (3) family communication education. Stamp’s (2004) recent review and analysis of the
family communication literature, resulting in a grounded theory model of family life, also reinforced the centrality of communication in the many sides of everyday family life.

Scores of theoretical and applied family communication studies continue to appear in journals in the communication field and beyond. In 2000, the *Journal of Family Communication* began publishing theoretical and applied research studies about family communication, as well as commentaries written by prominent practitioners and scholars from allied fields, including, for example, a commentary about the need for parental mediation of children’s home television viewing written by the late “Mister Rogers” (Rogers, 2001).

Along with journal articles, many scholarly books written or edited by communication researchers have showcased theoretical and applied work on marital communication (e.g., Fitzpatrick, 1988), parent–child communication (e.g., Socha & Stamp, 1995), communication in family units and family relationships (e.g., Fitzpatrick & Vangelisti, 1995), and family communication and ethnic culture (Socha & Diggs, 1999a). The ever-widening scope of this work was highlighted in the *Handbook of Family Communication* (Vangelisti, 2004) and in *The Family Communication Sourcebook* (Turner & West, 2006a).

Alongside the scholarly literature, at least nine other textbooks, some in multiple editions, have emerged since Galvin and Brommel’s (1982) first edition (Arliss, 1993; Arnold, 2008; Beebe & Masterson, 1986; Galvin, Bylund, & Brommel, 2008; Le Poire, 2006; Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1993; Pearson, 1989; Turner & West, 2006b; Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Bochner, 1995), and more undoubtedly are on the horizon. Today, these textbooks rely more on information gleaned from communication publications and far less on research from allied fields, as previously was the case. Moreover, as is true in many areas of the communication field, these textbooks represent a primary vehicle for dissemination of findings obtained from family communication research (applied and theoretical) to the public (i.e., college students).

This chapter takes stock of the potential of applied family communication as a force for promoting positive family life by critically reviewing past work and offering a scaffold on which future work might be built. Specifically, I provide a critical review of applied scholarship that seeks to understand the role of communication in managing family problems or problematic relationships between and among family members, family relationships, family units or groups, and families and societal institutions (such as government, education, and medicine). Based on this review, and drawing on recent work from the emerging area of positive psychology (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 2006; Lopez, 2009; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Snyder, 2000; Snyder & Lopez, 2005, 2007) that turns away from fixing problems after they occur toward prevention, empowerment, and other positive processes and outcomes, I argue that applied family communication research needs to widen its ontological assumptions beyond “a preoccupation...with repairing the worst things in life to also building the best qualities in life” (Seligman, 2002, p. 3). Specifically, scholars should develop a positive, applied approach that focuses on the role of communication in the development of family potentialities by investigating family communication and positive subjective experiences, positive personal traits, and positive relational and group qualities, in addition to the role of family communication in managing (and preventing) problems. I conclude the chapter with recommendations for this type of future research.

A Review of Applied Family Communication Literature

Literature reviews serve as scaffolds on which future research studies stand. This section seeks to widen and extend the scaffold for future scholarship by reviewing studies of “applied” family communication in the contexts of family relationships, family units, and
family members interfacing with individuals, relationships, groups, and organizations outside of family units. The Communication Institute for Online Scholarship (CIOS; http://www.cios.org) and the Communication & Mass Media Complete (CMMC) databases (through July 2008), as well as published books and textbooks within the family communication field, serve as the primary corpus on which the review is based.

In reviewing the literature, I encountered two preliminary challenges. First, the label “applied” typically is not used to title or subtitle family communication articles. Thus, a broad search strategy using general identifiers, such as “family,” was undertaken to generate a corpus of studies from which applied studies could be identified. Second, classifying a given family communication study as applied is not straightforward, as theoretical and applied threads often intertwine or reside side-by-side. Drawing on previous writings in applied communication (e.g., G. R. Miller & Sunnafrank, 1984; Whitchurch & Webb, 1995), I decided to include and examine only those studies that focused primarily on “problems” pertaining to family communication, or to the role of family communication in remedying problems that confront family members, family relationships, family units, or family members interfacing with outside individuals, relationships, and units. This choice represents a conservative framing of applied research, possibly leaving out some salient studies, but it did yield a preliminary list of studies that address issues of the scope of applied family communication research.

As lists were generated and combed to identify potential applied family communication studies, a third challenge emerged concerning how to best organize the numerous studies that focused on a wide variety of problems. This challenge frames the remainder of the chapter and serves as a stimulus for the construction of a positive approach for future applied family communication research studies.

**Applied Family Communication and Solving Problems**

Given that the traditional focus of applied research on family communication has been on the role of communication in managing real-world, everyday problems in family units (Whitchurch, 2001), an initial research question asked: What types of problems have applied family communication scholars studied? To answer this question, studies of family communication that focused on a problem where communication somehow played a role (e.g., as a significant cause of a problem or as a means to manage a problem) were identified and then sorted using the common label that authors gave to the problem in their studies. This preliminary list of problems addressed in previous applied family communication studies and their accompanying references helped to map the scope of applied family communication inquiry and to estimate the extent of attention given to particular problems.

The preliminary list of problems and accompanying citations is organized alphabetically by problem (see Table 13.1). When many citations were identified for a given problem, such as for divorce or children’s television viewing in the home, a select list of citations is included to sketch a representative picture of what has been published thus far in communication journals about each problem.

First, the problems listed in Table 13.1 highlight a familiar pattern: “Families” clearly are open systems that are interconnected to society, such that most of the applied family communication problems also can be found outside families, and some of these problems, such as violence and aggression, can be found across many societal groups and institutions. Moreover, although some problems, such as managing divorce and its aftermath, may originate primarily inside family systems, how families manage these problems affects other societal groups and institutions, such as schools and law enforcement. Reciprocally,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Applied Family Communication Studies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abuse</td>
<td>Clair &amp; Kunkel (1998); Eckstein (2004); Ford, Ray, &amp; Ellis (1999); Givens (1978); Petronio, Flores, &amp; Hecht (1997); Sabourin (1995); Wilson (1999, 2006); Wilson, Hayes, Bylund, Rack, &amp; Herman (2006); Wilson, Morgan, Hayes, Bylund, &amp; Herman (2004)</td>
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<td>Adoption</td>
<td>Suter (2008); Wahl, McBride, &amp; Schrodt (2005)</td>
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<td>Alcohol and Other Drugs</td>
<td>Austin &amp; Chen (2003); Booth-Butterfield &amp; Sidelinger (1998); Buckley &amp; Ambler (1980); Grant, Rosenfeld, &amp; Cissna (2004); Menees (1997); Tilson, McBride, &amp; Brouwer (2005)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aging</td>
<td>Fox (1999); Holladay (2002); Pecchioni &amp; Croghan (2002) (see also Nussbaum &amp; Ohs, this volume)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bereavement/Grieving</td>
<td>Bosticco &amp; Thompson (2005); Hastings (2001); Hastings, Musambira, &amp; Hoover (2007); Toller (2005)</td>
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<td>Children’s Empowerment</td>
<td>Chartier &amp; Chartier (1975); Jablin (1998); Koesten, Miller, &amp; Hummert (2002)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>Comstock (1994); Doucet &amp; Aseltine (2003); Dumalo &amp; Botta (2000); Flannery, Montemayor, Eberly, &amp; Torquati (1993); Fujioka &amp; Austin (2002); Koerner &amp; Fitzpatrick (2002); Orrego &amp; Rodriguez (2001); Sheaman &amp; Dunlao, 2008; Zhang (2007)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Divorce and Postdivorce</td>
<td>T. D. Afi fi &amp; Keith (2004); T. D. Afi fi, McManus, Hutchinson, &amp; Baker (2007); Cushman &amp; Cahn (1986); Donahue, Burrell, &amp; Allen (1993); Gottman, Levenson, &amp; Woodin (2001); Graham (1997); Hayashi &amp; Strickland (1998); Jones (1992); Masheter &amp; Harris (1986); Newcomb (1986); Thomas, Booth-Butterfield, &amp; Booth-Butterfield (1995)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eating Disorders and Obesity</td>
<td>Botta &amp; Dunlao (2002); Bruss et al. (2005); Miller-Day &amp; Marks (2006); Prescott &amp; Le Poire (2002); Vandebosch &amp; Van Cleemput (2007)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family Planning</td>
<td>Boulay, Storey, &amp; Sood (2002); Boulay &amp; Valente (2005); Durham (2008); Durham &amp; Braithwaite, 2009; Hindlin et al. (1994); Murphy (2004); Valente, Poppe, &amp; Merritt (1996)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Illness</td>
<td>J. A. Anderson &amp; Geist-Martin (2003); Arrington (2005); Beach (2002); Leslie, Stein, &amp; Rotheram-Borus (2002); Parrott &amp; Lemieux (2003); Pecchioni &amp; Sparks (2007); Unger, Jacobs, &amp; Cannon (1996); Whaley (1999)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interfaith Marriages</td>
<td>Hughes &amp; Dickson (2005)</td>
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<td>Long-Distance Relationships</td>
<td>Holladay &amp; Sepike (2007)</td>
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<td>Mental Health</td>
<td>Schrodt &amp; Afi fi (2007); Schrodt &amp; Ledbetter (2007); Schrodt, Ledbetter, &amp; Ohrt (2007)</td>
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<td>New Media</td>
<td>Cho &amp; Cheon (2005); Eastin, Greenberg, &amp; Hofschire (2006); Ling (2007); Livingstone &amp; Helsper (2007); Mesch (2006); Wartella &amp; Robb (2007)</td>
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Table 13.1 Continued

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<th>Problem</th>
<th>Applied Family Communication Studies</th>
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<td>Organ Donation</td>
<td>W. A. Afifi et al. (2006); Morgan &amp; Miller (2002); Smith, Kopfman, Lindsey, Yoo, &amp; Morrison (2004); Smith, Lindsey, Kopfman, Yoo, &amp; Morrison (2008); Vincent (2006)</td>
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<td>Political Socialization</td>
<td>Austin &amp; Pinkleton (2001); Connell (1972); Dennis (1986); Meadowcroft (1986); Niemi, Ross, &amp; Alexander (1978); Tims (1986); van Zoonen et al. (2007)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Secrets</td>
<td>T. D. Afifi &amp; Olson (2005); T. D. Afifi, Olson, &amp; Armstrong (2005); Caughlin et al. (2000); Vangelisti, Caughlin, &amp; Timmerman (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex and Birth Control</td>
<td>Heisler (2005); C. Warren (1992); C. Warren &amp; Neer (1986)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sexual Predators</td>
<td>Olson, Dagg, Ellevold, &amp; Rogers (2007)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suicide</td>
<td>M. Miller (1995); M. Miller &amp; Day (2002)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>Burleson &amp; Kunkel (2002); Christian (2005); Egbert, Koch, Coeling, &amp; Ayers (2006); Fitzpatrick, Marshall, Leutwiler, &amp; Kromar (1996); Leach &amp; Braithwaite (1996); Parrott &amp; Lemieux (2003); Yelsma &amp; Marrow (2003)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Television Viewing</td>
<td>Busselle (2003); Holloway &amp; Green (2008); Jennings &amp; Walker, 2009; Nathanson (1999); Nathanson, Wilson, McGee, &amp; Sebastian (2002); Scantlin &amp; Jordan (2006); R. Warren (2001); Weiss &amp; Wilson (1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>Buzzanell et al. (2006); Buzzanell, Waymer, Tagle, &amp; Liu (2007); Golden (2002); Kirby (2006); Krcmar &amp; Vieira (2005); Krouse &amp; Afifi (2007); Langellier &amp; Peterson (2006); Medved (2004); Medved et al. (2006); Parrott &amp; Lemieux (2003); Petronio (2006); Ritchie (1997)</td>
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</table>

how groups and societal institutions outside of families handle divorce, postdivorce, and stepfamily problems also affects what goes on in the home. The permeable boundaries of family life, thus, make society’s problems the problems of families (and visa versa), and suggest that interventions seeking to manage societal problems should include the family (for a discussion about neglecting families in developing interventions to confront the problem of racism, see Socha & Diggins, 1999b).

Second, the list of problems highlights the elastic boundaries that currently frame applied family communication studies; potentially, there is no limit to the types of problems available for exploration in the context of communication among family members. This is good news for applied family communication researchers in that there never will be a shortage of problems to investigate but this list also highlights the need to create better and more grounded understandings of applied family communication, as, for example, families may not experience problems one at a time or in isolation from other problems. Research studies that focus on a single problem, close up, are necessary, of
course, but studies that examine connections between and among problems also are needed. For example, physical child abuse (both long and short term) may, at times, co-occur with other problems, including alcoholism, drug use, and financial problems, to name but a few.

Third, the problems focused on also differ in salience among families, as well as various stakeholders (e.g., schools and societal agencies). Some problems pose high potential risks to multiple family resources (e.g., teen pregnancy can have significant effects on economic, educational, and relational resources for some families), whereas other problems may pose lower risks to fewer family resources (e.g., children watching a few minutes of an “adult” television program containing a few curse words). Problems that potentially are high risk (e.g., addiction, bankruptcy, extramarital affairs, illness, and lawsuits), or families that are experiencing many problems simultaneously (of high or low risk), raise stress in the family system, strain interaction among family members, and may deplete resources (e.g., communicative and economic) that potentially need to be augmented (e.g., from extended family, friendships, and professionals). Given that the scope of problems that families confront is wide, a better understanding of the commonalities that cut across problems, in general, as well as features unique to some problems, in particular, is needed to begin to build and test models of intervention and education that might help families to manage or avoid these problems.

Fourth, the problems that applied family communication researchers have chosen to study are driven, in part, by the agenda of individual researchers and, in part, by the agenda of government and nongovernment funding agencies. In contrast, collective efforts in other fields have resulted in awarding large-scale grants to professional associations to advance research. For example, the American Medical Association (AMA), in cooperation with the U.S. federal government, studied excessive television viewing as a contributing factor to U.S. children’s increasing obesity. This contributing factor led the AMA and other organizations to develop and promote an annual national campaign: “TV Turn-off Week” (see Dennison, Russo, Burdick, & Jenkins, 2004). Although data concerning the effectiveness of this intervention at trimming obesity trends are not known, a week without television is not likely to harm children and potentially can lead to other benefits, such as increased studying. Unlike the AMA and other professional associations, such as the American Psychological Association, professional communication associations have not sponsored or collaborated with other professional associations in setting or coordinating research agendas that involve large-scale studies, or in developing intervention programs. Because many problems listed in Table 13.1 are “large” (e.g., abuse, divorce, and violence), coordination of research and intervention efforts by professional communication associations could help to prioritize problems for large-scale studies, assist in raising resources for research, and guide the development and testing of communication interventions (see Frey & SunWolf, this volume).

Fifth, because this review is limited to communication journals, the list of problems in Table 13.1 necessarily is preliminary and incomplete, as there are many outlets for applied family communication research outside the communication field. For example, the well-known, programmatic work of psychology scholar John Gottman on marital processes (including communication) and predicting divorce (e.g., Gottman, 1994) is widely cited in family communication studies and textbooks, but with a few exceptions, appears mostly in publications outside the communication field. Furthermore, Gottman’s research has led to the development of interventions in the form of mass-marketed books, counselor education programs, and a Web site (e.g., Gottman, 1995; Gottman & Declaire, 2002; Gottman & Silver, 2000; for information about counselor training and couple resources, see The Gottman Institute’s Web site—http://www.gottman.com), as
well as a psycho-communicative-educational intervention with couples undergoing the transition to parenthood, with a study about it published in the *Journal of Family Communication* (Shapiro & Gottman, 2007).

For some problems, such as eating disorders, applied family communication researchers are joining established programs of research conducted in allied fields. For example, nutritionists (e.g., Larson, 1991; McNamar & Loveman, 1990) linked the problem of eating disorders, in part, to problematic interactions in family systems. Subsequently, communication researchers Botta and Dumlao (2002) and Prescott and Le Poire (2002) shed additional light on the problem in their research. In particular, Prescott and Le Poire, using Le Poire’s theory of inconsistent nurturing as control, offered preliminary evidence that an inconsistent, chaotic pattern of communicating parental nurturance might create conditions ripe for later eating disorder development in adolescents.

It also is apparent, however, that many problems have yet to appear much, if at all, on the radar screen of applied family communication researchers. For example, a current problem concerns parental violence directed toward players, coaches, officials, and even other parents at youth sporting events, with 84% of more than 3,300 parents, coaches, youth sports administrators, and youth surveyed saying they have witnessed parents acting violently (e.g., shouting, berating, and using abusive language; “Violence in Youth Sports,” n.d.), yet only one study has examined something related to that topic (Kassing & Barber, 2007). Only two other studies (of the hundreds of entries in the databases employed for this chapter that included “sport” or “sports” in the journal article title) dealt with family communication: Kremer-Sadlik and Kim’s (2007) study of children’s socialization to values through family interaction during sports activities, and Turman’s (2007) study of parental influence to encourage young athletes’ continued sport participation; although there is relevant scholarship in other disciplines (e.g., Kidman, McKenzie, & McKenzie, 1999). This problem poses potentially significant risks (e.g., physical health and legal) not only to parents (especially those who coach youth) but also to the children who witness parents’ antisocial behaviors. The problem is of sufficient significance and scope to prompt government involvement; for example, the provincial government of British Columbia, attempting to respond to increased reports of incidents of parent–coach violence at youth sporting events, requires parents as a condition of children’s participation to “sign behavioral contracts to control violence and prevent confrontations that lead to screaming matches and fighting [at youth sporting events]” (Macedo, n.d., ¶ 2).

Another serious problem yet to be studied by applied family communication researchers pertains to children’s firearm injuries at home. A search using keywords of *gun(s)*, *firearm(s)*, and related terms yielded only one study that pertained to families, the applied communication study by Roberto, Meyer, Johnson, Atkin, and Smith (2002) about the effectiveness of a public service announcement radio broadcast in Michigan to parents about the danger to children from an unlocked and loaded gun (see also Witte & Roberto, this volume). The lack of such studies is unfortunate, as a report compiled by the nonprofit organization Common Sense about Kids and Guns (n.d.), using data from the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (2003) database, noted that between 3,000 and 4,000 children’s deaths (accidents, homicides, and suicides) are attributed to mishandled or unsecured firearms in the home. Furthermore, other disciplines have responded to this problem; calling firearm injuries to children an “epidemic,” the American Academy of Pediatrics (2000), along with the American Psychological Association (2004), developed brochures and Web sites directed to pediatricians and parents, advising them how to talk to children about firearms violence.

Sixth, with a few exceptions, it is difficult (and, in my opinion, premature) to determine the extent of research progress made regarding any particular problem listed in Table 13.1.
One reason pertains to how “progress” is to be defined. If by progress, we mean how close we are to solving the problems listed via family communication education and other interventions, we have a very long way to go. However, if we mean how close we are to better understanding some of the elements or conditions that might inform or lead to promising interventions, we are a bit further along with respect to some problems, as many of the clusters of studies do point out promising antecedents for future inquiry that also might inform the development of interventions. For example, on the assumption that it is desirable for marriages to last (assuming they are good), progress has been made in identifying and testing particular marital communication patterns that increase the chances of divorce (e.g., Gottman’s work cited earlier), and considerable progress has been made in documenting the benefits of parental monitoring of children’s home television viewing on diminishing its negative effects on children (for an overview, see Van Evra, 2004; for a review of specific benefits of family mediation, see Buerkel-Rothfuss & Buerkel, 2001).

Progress also might be defined by studies that draw attention to significant problems where applied family communication clearly plays a major role. For example, M. Miller (2001) and M. Miller and Day (2002) conducted research on parent–child communication regarding the problem of teen suicidality (tendency toward suicide). These two studies provided preliminary evidence suggesting a correlation between recollections of parents’ frequent negative messages (e.g., verbal aggression and attacks on children’s self-image) and some children’s psychological propensity to consider taking their life. However, because this research is in its early stages, it is far too early to assess its progress, and given the small number of studies, it also is premature to develop and test interventions, although it is important that this work continue, especially because this a unique situation where messages literally can be a matter of life or death.

Although all of the studies cited in Table 13.1 are suggestive of features that might be used to develop educational and intervention programs, they suffer from a few common ailments that limit their potential. First, the small, nonrandom samples that typically are used create external validity problems; clearly, large, national representative samples are needed. To develop effective interventions, including educational materials, it is important, of course, to be sure that the advice fits the population to which it is offered. Without representative samples on which to base advice, extreme caution is de rigueur. Second, these studies await replication. If we are to be confident that education and other interventions are to be effective, testing of multiple populations is needed. Third, applied family communication is a relative newcomer in applied social-scientific fields and, as such, many of its studies necessarily are descriptive (e.g., most rely on correlational analysis), exploratory, and intended to generate theory rather than test theory. These studies typically do not offer advice but, instead, close with cautionary and tentative speculation about ways in which future findings might be applied.

In light of these six points, rather than charting the details of these emerging and evolving lines of inquiry, it is more useful to devote the remaining space to an examination of a particular assumption that underscores applied family communication theory and research, in general. I then use this discussion to suggest that a wider foundation for applied family communication research is needed—specifically, a move toward a positive, integrative model that might better support future applied family communication research.

Toward a Positive Approach to Applied Family Communication

I suspect that most family communication researchers who seek to have others apply their work (not all may be interested in such application) hope that their work might somehow help families to manage life “better.” That is, they hope that their applied family com-
munication research, in general, might lead to education and other interventions that help families to improve the quality of their communication (individual, relational, family/group, and family/network), especially as related to solving the many problems they confront, or, in more general terms, to use communication more effectively to manage family life.

Discussion and debate in clinical psychology, however, suggest that framing applied research in terms of “solving problems” and “improvement” actually focuses attention and energies negatively and too narrowly on repairing, fixing, and healing, rather than focusing positively on empowering. According to Seligman (2002), then writing about the emerging field of positive psychology, the focus of past research is too narrow and should include:

- well-being, satisfaction; flow, joy, sensual pleasures, and happiness; constructive cognitions about the future—optimism, hope, and faith. At the individual level, it is about positive personal traits—the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future-mindedness, high talent, and wisdom. At the group level, it is about civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals to better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic. (p. 3)

Positive psychology, thus, challenges the prevailing ontological assumptions of traditional clinical psychology—a negative, disease-based model of “healing”—and, instead, argues for a positive reframing that features “prevention” and “positive therapy.” The *Handbook of Positive Psychology* (Snyder & Lopez, 2005), *Oxford Handbook of Methods in Positive Psychology* (Ong & van Dulmen, 2007), and *Handbook of Hope: Theory, Measures, and Applications* (Snyder, 2000), among other texts, are recent examples that report on this approach.

From the vantage point of positive psychology, reviewing the problems and research cited in Table 13.1 shows that past applied family communication research seems to have taken a path similar to that of traditional clinical psychology. This path began with the negative assumption that communication in families is, in some way, deficient and that it is up to family communication scholars to generate research that can inform the development of interventions (e.g., courses, textbooks, and campaigns) designed to help families overcome their communication deficiencies. Instead, following the lead of positive psychologists, it is more useful for family communication scholars to focus on the role of communication and the development of positive qualities (e.g., creativity, hope, and love) that characterize creative, artful, and successful families, and also work to develop preventative measures.

Reframing applied family communication in positive ontological terms has important theoretical and practical implications for family communication. First, a positive reframing opens up new and potentially theoretically useful ways to reconceptualize families and applied family communication. For example, McGeer (2004), a philosopher, mentioned “family” in an essay about the role of societal agencies in creating conditions that facilitate or inhibit development of what she called “good hope.” Expanding McGeer’s framing further, I see “families” as “agencies of potential” that create conditions for the development of many kinds of potentialities or capacities (e.g., artistic, athletic, economic, educational, psychological, social, and spiritual) on multiple levels (i.e., among family members, family relationships, family units, family networks, and family interfacing with society).

A reframing of families as agencies of potential leads to a redefining of applied family
communication as a symbolic process of facilitating or inhibiting potential. There are several advantages to this reframing; in particular, it offers a new starting point for applied family communication research, moving it away from studies of the role of communication in managing “problems” toward studies of the role of communication in creating or destroying conditions necessary to facilitate potential. Instead of studies that examine the communication of “dysfunctional” families relative to communication of “functional” families, and then proposing interventions to turn dysfunctional into functional families, positive family communication researchers would examine the role of family communication in creating or destroying conditions that facilitate versus inhibit development of family potentialities and capacities, and then propose communication interventions designed to augment family resources and refine family processes to facilitate the development of those potentialities and capacities. Such a reframing widens the scaffold for future research by adding a positive focus and concentrating on the role of communication in the development of potentialities and capacities—a communication strengths approach. Below, I consider further what a positive model of applied family communication might look like, first by examining critically the types of inputs studied in past family communication research, and second, by discussing an important positive family quality—hope—and the role that family communication plays in its development.

Toward the Study of Positive Family Communication Inputs and Processes

From its start, family communication studies conceptualized families as systems. All family communication textbooks introduce students to systems theory and frame their foundational discussions of family and family communication in the language of that theory. However, the scholarship in the field has emphasized the communication of individual family members and family dyads, isolated from family units/groups (Socha, 1999), rather than the communication of family units and family networks.

In the basic systems model as applied to families, various types of inputs (e.g., facts and opinions) are processed (e.g., family decision-making practices) into outputs (e.g., family decisions and family member satisfaction). Applied family communication research studies have examined a variety of inputs common to many families, although those studies have tended to focus on family inputs that are relatively unchangeable (e.g., sex of family members, attachment patterns, health conditions, and couple types), rather than inputs that can change as a function of education or other interventions, such as the development of individuals’ communication skills. K. L. Anderson, Umberson, and Elliott (2004), for instance, suggested that increasing the individual communication skills of family members can prevent abuse in families.

Researchers also have examined a wide variety of family outputs, although here, too, they often conceptualize family outputs dichotomously—such as functional–dysfunctional, abusive–non-abusive, and violent–nonviolent—rather than as scaled or on a continuum. In a critique of family conflict research, for example, Sillars, Canary, and Tafoya (2004) aptly pointed out the limits of using dichotomies such as productive–unproductive to conceptualize conflict strategies and distressed–non-distressed to conceptualize outputs. Sillars et al. urged researchers, instead, to examine the “range of conflict styles and communication patterns found among families who could be considered ‘adequately functioning’” (p. 433). Their critique is useful insofar that it moves us toward ranges, but in light of positive psychology, conceptualizing family output as “adequately functioning,” sets the bar rather low. That is, although most families probably do not object to being labeled as “nonviolent” or as “competent,” some families might aspire to be more than competent. Although this is an empirical question that requires study, some
families might augment positive family inputs (e.g., increasing the family’s capacity for compassion, creativity, empathy, forgiveness, hope, laughter, self-esteem, and spirituality), refine and improve positive family communication processes (e.g., moving beyond competent toward caring and elegant), and set higher standards for family outputs (e.g., moving beyond family “satisfaction” toward altruism, integrity, joyfulness, nurturance, peacefulness, and pride).

Thus, in light of positive psychology and McGeer’s (2004) notion of family as an agent of potential, applied family communication scholars might best focus their attention and energy in two areas: (1) understanding the role that family communication plays in augmenting positive family inputs (e.g., increasing families’ compassion, creativity, hope, and laughter) and (2) understanding the role of family communication processes in creating conditions that facilitate the development of family potential, or how families use communication to create conditions that are optimal for their growth and development (e.g., for a reframing of the concept of “discipline” from this perspective, see Socha, 2006).

If such a shift is taken seriously, studies would focus less on the role of communication in solving family problems and more on the role of family communication in creating conditions that might prevent family problems, as well as on the role of family communication in building positive resources to draw on when problems do arise. To illustrate what a shift to positive applied family communication research might entail, I close this chapter with an extended example, drawn from Snyder’s (2000) theory of hope.

**Hope**

Snyder (2000) argued that hope is an essential aspect of psychological wellness and theorized that hope involves three elements: goals, pathways thoughts, and agency thoughts. **Goals** are end states that individuals perceive, desire, or hope for; **pathways thoughts** are the many ways that individuals imagine themselves reaching a desired goal; and **agency thoughts** are those that “reflect one’s appraisal of the capability to persevere in the goal journey” (Snyder, 2000, p. 10). Pathways thoughts are linked, for example, to problem solving and creativity, and agency thoughts are linked to self-efficacy and self-esteem. “Hopeful thinking” is a combination of pathways thinking (individuals imagining ways to reach their desired goals) plus agency thinking (individuals believing that they have what it takes to reach their goals and that they are worthy of reaching those goals). Snyder and colleagues developed and validated scales to measure individual differences in hope for adults (Snyder, Harris et al., 1991) and for children (Snyder, et al., 1997). These scales have been used to study the role of hope in a variety of contexts, problems, and populations, including depression, eating disorders, ethnic cultural relations, surviving breast cancer and AIDS, and with athletes (see Snyder, 2000).

This research shows that individuals differ in their ability to hope (ranging from high hope to low hope) and that differences in hope can be explained, in part, by social processes. For example, Rodriguez-Hanley and Snyder (2000) outlined conditions under which children’s capacity to hope can be damaged by abuse and neglect, or lost due to a parent’s death or lack of consistent family structure. Snyder (2000) suggested, generally, that communication is a significant process in the facilitation or diminution of hope. For example, families that share their creative insights about new ways of thinking about obstacles they face can increase their capacity for pathways thinking, and families that share messages intended to increase their members’ self-worth and encourage a “can-do” spirit can increase their individual and collective capacity for agentic thinking. Thus, according to Snyder’s hope theory, families that communicate in ways that increase pathways thinking (ability to understand obstacles and develop pathways
to manage those obstacles) and agentic thinking (feelings of efficacy and worth) are likely to increase family hope—a positive psychological condition necessary for optimal growth.

In the context of hope theory, an initial task for applied communication researchers is to examine how families use messages to create conditions favorable for the development of hope as they confront specific obstacles pertaining to the many sides of family life (e.g., finances and wellness—illness). First, in what ways do families use messages to facilitate or inhibit pathways thinking? In the context of family finances, for example, in what ways do families use communication to create more effective ways of managing their money or to create obstacles to better money management? Parents who tell their children, “We are poor—get used to it,” for instance, may limit pathways to thinking about family finances, as opposed to parents who promote shared pathways thinking by asking their children, “We need to make every penny count, so how can we work together to make what we have go farther and increase what we have?”

Second, in what ways are families using communication to facilitate or inhibit agentic thinking? Satir (1967, 1972, 1988) and other family therapists established that family members’ positive sense of self-worth is an essential element of healthy people and families, and showed that how family members communicate with each other can increase or diminish their self-worth. Continuing the example of family finances, parents who tell their children, “Don’t even bother to apply for that scholarship; folks like us have no chance,” limit agentic thinking, as opposed to parents who say, “Your odds of getting that scholarship only go up by submitting a well-written application, and you can do it.”

How families use messages to create or diminish conditions favorable for high hope, in general, and as they confront particular obstacles is one example of a larger positive applied family communication research agenda. Indeed, families do confront many significant problems, but by refocusing attention on prevention and creating conditions that are favorable to coping, such as high hope, we refocus attention on a changeable factor where applied family communication can make a difference in the quality of family life.

**Conclusion**

The potential of applied family communication as a force for promoting positive changes for families and society is great. From the studies identified in this review that explore many serious obstacles that families confront, it is clear that applied family communication researchers care about aiding families. I have suggested that reframing applied family communication studies in more positive terms, and refocusing applied family communication studies on the development of family potential, offers a wider and more coherent scaffold on which to build future applied family communication research. Thus, rather than continuing to study the ever-present weeds of family life, family communication researchers should pay attention to the conditions under which both flowers and weeds thrive.

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