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# communication

## FOR

# *families*

## IN

# CRISIS

## theories, research, strategies

# Foreward

# Families in Crucibles: Toward a Communication Perspective on Helping Families in Crises

John P. Caughlin

In the first chapter of this volume, Webb and Dickson suggest that the publication of this book demonstrates that scholarship on family communication has achieved an important level of maturity. I concur. Just a few decades ago, researchers interested in family communication had to argue for the importance of family communication as a distinct research context. Now Webb and Dickson are able to start with the presumption that communication researchers understand that families and family communication are important. Consequently, this volume can immediately begin with the substantive issue at hand: What is the role of communication in helping families manage crises? As Webb and Dickson point out, the production of volumes focusing on specialized topics (as this book does) demonstrates that scholarship by family communication scholars has become diverse and rich.

Yet, the emergence of this volume represents more than the increasing richness of the literature in general; it also reflects an important addition to the main agenda of family communication scholarship. Traditionally, most family communication research fits with a statement in Vangelisti's (2004) preface to the *Handbook of Family Communication*: "the family is the crucible of society" (p. ix). This broad statement reflects the myriad ways families affect their members and vice versa. Thinking about the family as the crucible of society is reflected in most extant research by family communication scholars, which focuses on questions like how marital communication influences partners' satisfaction, how parenting helps socialize new family members, how family members make sense of their lives, how particular family relations or forms influence family communication and family members, and so forth.

As this volume demonstrates, there recently has been a noticeable increase in family communication research examining what happens when a family confronts crisis. It has become routine, for example, for the program at the National Communication Association convention to include multiple papers (and sometimes multiple panels) on how family members cope with various health crises. Such scholarship indicates that family communication researchers are intent on putting a new twist on Vangelisti's statement: Although families remain a crucible of society, the current volume easily could have been called "families in society's crucibles." Communication scholars undoubtedly will continue to be interested in overall connections between family communication and family well-being, but there is now a distinct additional focus on understanding what happens to families when they encounter extremely difficult circumstances.

I applaud the editors of this book for bringing these chapters together and the authors of these chapters for engaging in research that seeks to understand real problems that real families encounter. I also was impressed that the editors asked the authors of each chapter to explicitly discuss applied implications of their research, describing the "best practices" for communication during these crises. This move toward direct applications of family communication scholarship is an exciting development.

Because the current volume is likely to portend increased interest in researching families communicating during crises, it is useful to consider the challenges that scholars may encounter as research in this area becomes more common and prominent. It is impossible to predict all the potential pitfalls, but based on scholarship in the larger discipline, it is possible to foresee some potential challenges. I discuss three such challenges here.

## Understanding Specific Crises without Becoming Too Theoretically Narrow

The research in this volume examines a number of specific crises, ranging from the death of a child (Johnson & Webb), to a family member being deployed for war (Maguire & Sahlstein), to various health crises and economic crises. Collectively, these crises pose very heterogeneous difficulties for families. Given such heterogeneity,

knowing what communication challenges confront families in a given crisis often will tell us little about what a family will encounter in a different crisis.

Research on how couples manage one partner's illness makes this point clearly. Goldsmith, Lindholm, and Bute (2006), for example, studied how couples cope with one partner having a serious cardiac event. One communicative challenge that the patients' partners faced was how to encourage the medically recommended dietary changes without coming across as too controlling or nagging. This challenge is linked to the specifics of the disease and treatment; that is, the same issue would probably not be relevant in most other circumstances involving a patient and a partner. For example, a partner encouraging a breast cancer patient to continue with her recommended treatment would not be viewed as nagging, at least not in the same way that a partner of a heart disease patient may be viewed when telling his or her partner to order fish instead of a cheeseburger at a restaurant. Health crises, and the best communicative practices for coping with them, need to be understood in situ.

The need to understand crises in situ, however, does not mean that communication scholars should come to each circumstance as if we know nothing about communication generally. Ideally, scholars would be able to examine the specifics of a crisis while still being able to draw upon existing knowledge, and they would to be able say something that has theoretical value beyond the particular context. This is difficult. Research that does an excellent job of making concrete and applied differences is often subject to criticism that it is not theoretical enough. Conversely, scholars who attempt to examine an existing theory or model in a new context are sometimes accused of not knowing enough about the context to understand what is really important.

The challenges of understanding a context and also contributing broadly to theory are both practical and theoretical. On the practical side, no one scholar is likely to be fully trained to do both. This means that collaboration is probably essential to fulfill the long-term promise implied by this volume. I was therefore very pleased to see that several of the chapters used multidisciplinary teams, bringing clinical and nursing perspectives to the analysis. The theoretical problem is

more vexing because most communication theories have focused more on generalizable principles than on understanding the nuances of a particular context. The few theories that focus on specific contexts tend to shy away from making broad statements about how communication operates.

There are, of course, some productive ways to deal with this problem, and I discuss two here. First, scholars can put the understanding of a specific socially important problem in the foreground and then draw upon existing theories to help inform how we should go about trying to understand and address that problem. This strategy typically involves borrowing useful ideas and concepts from more than one broad theory or literature and then making a more specific argument about the problem at hand. Sometimes readers of this type of research mistakenly think that it is not theoretical because it does not begin with a summary of some single theoretical framework that drives the entire study. This is an unfortunate misconception of what it means to be theoretical. Indeed, I would argue that in many cases the ability to integrate theoretical ideas from several sources is more impressive (and often more useful) than rote application of a single theory. The Maguire and Sahlstein chapter is a great example of this type of theoretical work addressing a specific problem. Their chapter uses the literature on stress and stressors as well as research on communal coping to provide a general understanding of coping processes. Then Maguire and Sahlstein use the existing literature to make an argument for which specific features of the military context are likely to be most important for understanding stress and coping. This is a theoretical argument about how to usefully understand the specific problem at hand, and it provides an example of how family communication researchers can connect specific applied problems to broader theoretical ideas and understandings.

Another strategy for addressing the need to be both theoretically broad yet pertinent to specific applied problems is to use theories that provide us with a general mechanism for thinking about specific situations. One theory that is exceptional in this regard is Goldsmith's (2004) rhetorical/normative model. Her model is specific in the sense that it focuses attention on the communicative challenges of particular types of circumstances. It is also general in the way it makes a theo-

retical argument for what counts as best practices in communication: Sophisticated communication involves enacting the acts and strategies that best manage the multiple (and often competing) communicative challenges in a particular situation. Goldsmith's model provides a general theoretical mechanism for thinking about particular circumstances, and it also highlights the need to understand the specifics. Even if Goldsmith's model itself is not adopted widely, the way that it addresses both the general and the specific illustrates that scholars do not need to choose between understanding a context and being theoretical.

**Retaining Unique Communication Perspective**

When communication scholars first began to study family communication, there were already substantial bodies of research on family interaction in other disciplines (Caughlin, Koerner, Schrodt, & Fitzpatrick, 2011). Over time, communication scholars brought a distinct perspective to family interaction. Although they used many different theories and methods, family communication scholars shared certain research foci, like being interested in features of messages and the meaning of these messages in particular contexts. The interest in messages and meaning is in contrast with most scholarship about family interaction from disciplines like psychology, family studies, and sociology (Caughlin, 2010).

Although family communication scholars have articulated their own perspective, there is a danger in moving into research areas that previously have been dominated by scholars from other disciplines. The impact of crises on families has been a major topic of research among family studies scholars and family sociologists. It is natural to look to this existing research to help understand family crises, but family communication scholars should be wary of being too influenced by the conceptualizations and measures of communication that exist outside the field. There are certainly exceptions, but scholars from outside the discipline of communication frequently have an impoverished view of communication. Often they summarize family interaction as a single variable representing either frequency or affect.

There are reasons to worry that interacting with other fields can lead communication researchers to forget their unique perspective.