Lesson 10.3 Communication and Families

Who do you consider part of your family? Many people would initially name people who they are related to by blood. You may also name a person with whom you are in a committed relationship— a partner or spouse. But some people have a person not related by blood that they might refer to as *aunt* or *uncle* or even as a brother or sister. We can see from these examples that it's not simple to define a family.

This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY-SA

Defining Family

The definitions people ascribe to families usually fall into at least one of the following categories: *structural definitions, task-orientation definitions,* and *transactional definitions.* Chris Segrin and Jeanne Flora, *Family Communication* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005), 5–11.

Structural definitions of family focus on form, criteria for membership, and often hierarchy of family members. One example of a structural definition of family is two or more people who live together and are related by birth, marriage, or adoption. From this definition, a father and son, two cousins, or a brother and sister could be considered a family if they live together. However, a single person living alone or with

nonrelated friends, or a couple who chooses not to or are not legally able to marry would not be considered a family. These definitions rely on external, “objective” criteria for determining who is in a family and who is not, which makes the definitions useful for groups like the US Census Bureau, lawmakers, and other researchers who need to define family for large-scale data collection. The simplicity and time-saving positives of these definitions are countered by the fact that many family types are left out in general structural definitions; however, more specific structural definitions have emerged in recent years that include more family forms.

Family of origin refers to relatives connected by blood or other traditional legal bonds such as marriage or adoption and includes parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews. Family of orientation refers to people who share the same household and are connected by blood, legal bond, or who act/live as if they are connected by either. Chris Segrin and Jeanne Flora, *Family Communication* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005), 6–7.

Unlike family of origin, this definition is limited to people who share the same household and represents the family makeup we choose. For example, most young people don’t get to choose who they live with, but as we get older, we choose our spouse or partner or may choose to have or adopt children.

There are several subdefinitions of families of orientation. Chris Segrin and Jeanne Flora, *Family Communication* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005), 7.

A nuclear family includes two heterosexual married parents and one or more children. While this type of family has received a lot of political and social attention, some scholars argue that it was only dominant as a family form for a brief part of human history. Gary W. Peterson and Suzanne K. Steinmetz, “Perspectives on Families as We Approach the Twenty-first Century: Challenges for Future Handbook Authors,” in *The Handbook of Marriage and the Family*, eds. Marvin B. Sussman, Suzanne K. Steinmetz, and Gary W. Peterson (New York: Springer, 1999), 2.

This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY-SA

A binuclear family is a nuclear family that was split by divorce into two separate households, one headed by the mother and one by the father, with the original children from the family residing in each home for periods of time. A single-parent family includes a mother or father who may or may not have been previously married with one or more children. A stepfamily includes a heterosexual couple that lives together with children from a previous relationship. A cohabitating family includes a heterosexual couple who lives together in a committed relationship but does not have a legal bond such as marriage (and may or may not have children). Similarly, a gay or lesbian family includes a couple of the same gender who live together in a committed relationship and may or may not have a legal bond such as marriage, a civil union, or a domestic partnership and may or may not have children.

Is it more important that the structure of a family matches a definition, or should we define family based on the behavior of people or the quality of their interpersonal interactions? Unlike structural definitions of family, functional definitions focus on tasks or interaction within the family unit. *Task-orientation definitions* of family recognize that behaviors like emotional and financial support are more important interpersonal indicators of a family-like connection than biology. In short, anyone who fulfills the typical tasks present in families is considered family. For example, in some cases, custody of children has been awarded to a person not biologically related to a child over a living blood relative because that person acted more like a family member to the child. The most common family tasks include nurturing and socializing other family members. Nurturing family members entails providing basic care and support, both

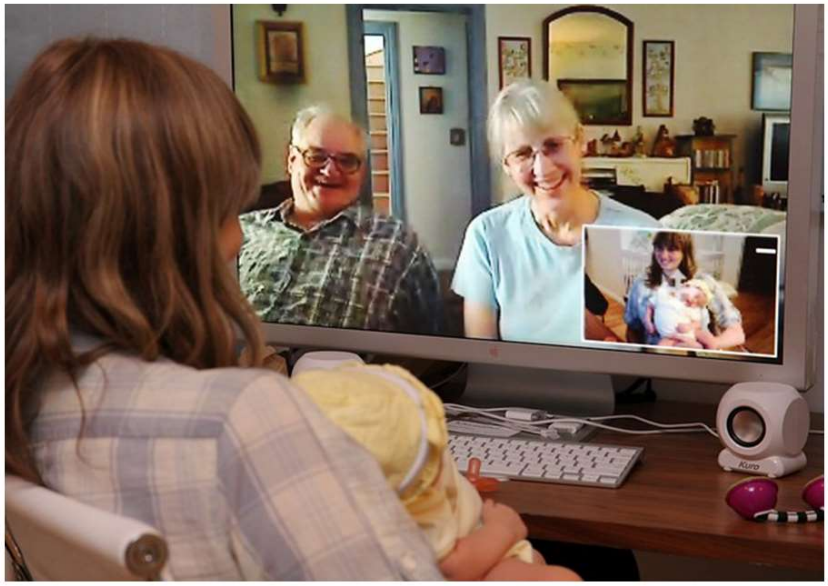
emotional and financial. Socializing family members refers to teaching young children how to speak, read, and practice social skills.

This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND

Transactional definitions of family focus on communication and subjective feelings of connection. While task-orientation definitions convey the importance of providing for family members, transactional definitions are concerned with the quality of interaction among family members. Specifically, transactional definitions stress that the creation of a sense of home, group identity, loyalty, and a shared past and future makes up a family. Isn't it true that someone could provide food, shelter, and transportation to school for a child but not create a sense of home? Even though there is no one, all-encompassing definition of *family*, perhaps this is for the best. Given that family is a combination of structural, functional, and communicative elements, it warrants multiple definitions to capture that complexity.

Family Communication Processes

Think about how much time we spend communicating with family members over the course of our lives. As children, most of us spend much of our time talking to parents, grandparents, and siblings. As we become adolescents, our peer groups become more central, and we may even begin to resist communicating with our family during the rebellious teenage years. However, as we begin to choose and form our own families, we once again spend time engaging in family communication. Additionally, family communication is our primary source of intergenerational communication, or communication between people of different age groups.



This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY-SA

Family Interaction Rituals

You may have heard or used the term *family time* in your own families. What does *family time* mean? As was discussed earlier, relational cultures are built on interaction routines and rituals. Families also have interaction norms that create, maintain, and change communication climates. The notion of family time hasn't been around for too long but was widely communicated and represented in the popular culture of the 1950s. Kerry J. Daly, "Deconstructing Family Time: From Ideology to Lived Experience," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 63, no. 2 (2001): 283–95

When we think of family time, or *quality time* as it's sometimes called, we usually think of a romanticized ideal of family time spent together.

While family rituals and routines can definitely be fun and entertaining bonding experiences, they can also bring about interpersonal conflict and strife. Just think about Clark W. Griswold's string of well-intentioned but misguided attempts to manufacture family fun in the *National Lampoon's Vacation* series.

Families engage in a variety of rituals that demonstrate symbolic importance and shared beliefs, attitudes, and values. Three main types of relationship rituals are *patterned family interactions, family traditions,* and *family celebrations.* Steven J. Wolin and Linda A. Bennett, "Family Rituals," *Family Process* 23, no. 3 (1984): 401–20.

Patterned family interactions are the most frequent rituals and do not have the degree of formality of traditions or celebrations. Patterned interactions may include mealtime, bedtime, receiving guests at the house, or leisure activities. Mealtime rituals may include a rotation of who cooks and who cleans, and many families have set seating arrangements at their dinner table.

Family traditions are more formal, occur less frequently than patterned interactions, vary widely from family to family, and include birthdays, family reunions, and family vacations. Birthday traditions may involve a trip to a favorite restaurant, baking a cake, or hanging streamers. Family reunions may involve making t-shirts for the group or counting up the collective age of everyone present. Family road trips may involve predictable conflict between siblings or playing car games like “I spy” or trying to find the most number of license plates from different states.

This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND

Lastly, *family celebrations* are also formal, have more standardization between families, may be culturally specific, help transmit values and memories through generations, and include rites of passage and religious and secular holiday celebrations. Thanksgiving, for example, is formalized by a national holiday and is celebrated in similar ways by many families in the United States. Rites of passage mark life-cycle transitions such as graduations, weddings, quinceañeras, or bar mitzvahs. While graduations are secular and may vary in terms of how they are celebrated, quinceañeras have cultural roots in Latin America, and bar mitzvahs are a long-established religious rite of passage in the Jewish faith.

Conversation and Conformity Orientations

The amount, breadth, and depth of conversation between family members varies from family to family. Additionally, some families encourage self-exploration and freedom, while others expect family unity and control. This variation can be better understood by examining two key factors that influence family communication: *conversation orientation* and *conformity orientation.* Ascan F. Koerner and Mary Anne Fitzpatrick, "Toward a Theory of Family Communication," *Communication Theory* 12, no. 1 (2002): 85–89.

A given family can be higher or lower on either dimension, and how a family rates on each of these dimensions can be used to determine a family type.

To determine conversation orientation, we determine to what degree a family encourages members to interact and communicate (converse) about various topics. Members within a family with a high conversation orientation communicate with each other freely and frequently about activities, thoughts, and feelings. This unrestricted communication style leads to all members, including children, participating in family decisions. Parents in high-conversation-orientation families believe that communicating with their children openly and frequently leads to a more rewarding family life and helps to educate and socialize children, preparing them for interactions outside the family.

This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY-ND

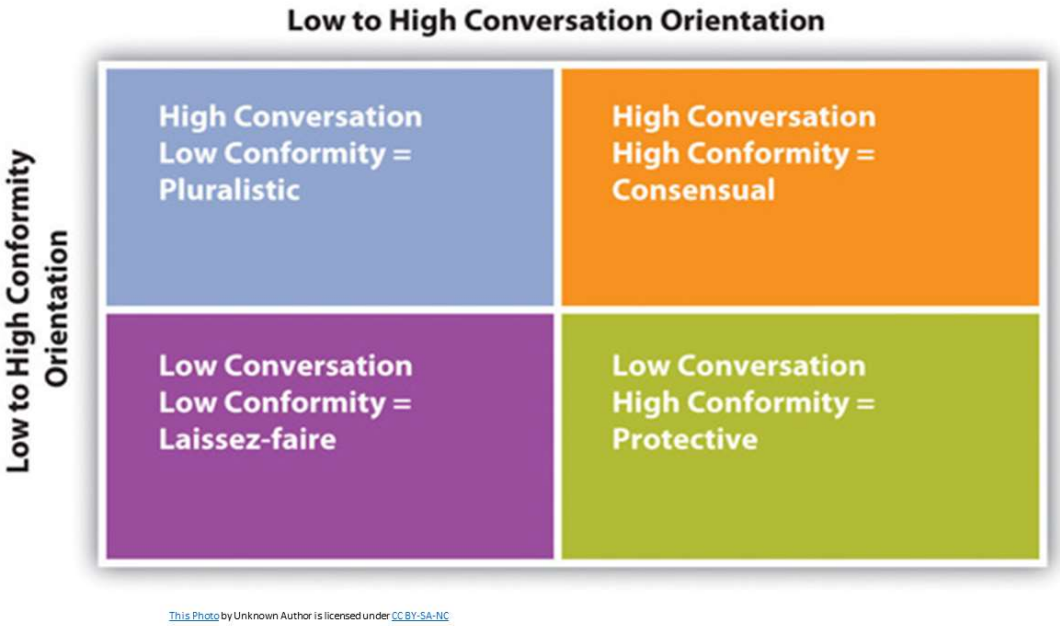
Members of a family with a low conversation orientation do not interact with each other as often, and topics of conversation are more restricted, as some thoughts are

considered private. For example, not everyone's input may be sought for decisions that affect everyone in the family, and open and frequent communication is not deemed important for family functioning or for a child's socialization.

Conformity orientation is determined by the degree to which a family communication climate encourages conformity and agreement regarding beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors. Ascan F. Koerner and Mary Anne Fitzpatrick, "Toward a Theory of Family Communication," *Communication Theory* 12, no. 1 (2002): 85–89.

A family with a high conformity orientation fosters a climate of uniformity, and parents decide guidelines for what to conform to. Children are expected to be obedient, and conflict is often avoided to protect family harmony. This more traditional family model stresses interdependence among family members, which means space, money, and time are shared among immediate family, and family relationships take precedent over those outside the family. A family with a low conformity orientation encourages diversity of beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors and assertion of individuality. Relationships outside the family are seen as important parts of growth and socialization, as they teach lessons about and build confidence for independence. Members of these families also value personal time and space.

Determining where your family falls on the conversation and conformity dimensions is more instructive when you know the family types that result, which are consensual, pluralistic, protective, and laissez-faire. Ascan F. Koerner and Mary Anne Fitzpatrick, "Toward a Theory of Family Communication," *Communication Theory* 12, no. 1 (2002): 87.



This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY-SA-NC

A consensual family is high in both conversation and conformity orientations, and they encourage open communication but also want to maintain the hierarchy within the family that puts parents above children. This creates some tension between a desire for both openness and control. Parents may reconcile this tension by hearing their children's opinions, making the ultimate decision themselves, and then explaining why they made the decision they did.

A pluralistic family is high in conversation orientation and low in conformity. Open discussion is encouraged for all family members, and parents do not strive to control their children's or each other's behaviors or decisions. Instead, they value the life lessons that a family member can learn by spending time with non–family members or engaging in self-exploration.

A protective family is low in conversation orientation and high in conformity, expects children to be obedient to parents, and does not value open communication. Parents make the ultimate decisions and may or may not feel the need to share their reasoning with their children. If a child questions a decision, a parent may simply respond with "Because I said so."

This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND

A laissez-faire family is low in conversation and conformity orientations, has infrequent and/or short interactions, and doesn't discuss many topics. Remember that pluralistic families also have a low conformity orientation, which means they encourage children to make their own decisions in order to promote personal exploration and growth. Laissez-faire families are different in that parents don't have an investment in their children's decision making, and in general, members in this type of family are "emotionally divorced" from each other. Ascan F. Koerner and Mary Anne Fitzpatrick, "Toward a Theory of Family Communication," *Communication Theory* 12, no. 1 (2002): 87.

In Summary

- There are many ways to define a family.
  - Structural definitions focus on form of families and have narrow criteria for membership.
  - Task-orientation definitions focus on behaviors like financial and emotional support.
  - Transactional definitions focus on the creation of subjective feelings of home, group identity, and a shared history and future.
- Family rituals include patterned interactions like a nightly dinner or bedtime ritual, family traditions like birthdays and vacations, and family celebrations like holidays and weddings.

- Conversation and conformity orientations play a role in the creation of family climates.
    - *Conversation orientation* refers to the degree to which family members interact and communicate about various topics.
    - *Conformity orientation* refers to the degree to which a family expects uniformity of beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors.
    - Conversation and conformity orientations intersect to create the following family climates: consensual, pluralistic, protective, and laissez-faire.