

Changing Communication Patterns

Learning Outcomes

After studying this chapter, you should be able to

1. Describe how the *digital world* impacts various aspects of family life and communication.
2. Summarize how screen time influences *child development*.
3. Consider the implications of digital communications for *family dynamics*.
4. Explain the *interacting factors* that influence communication.
5. Analyze *family communication pattern theory*, and identify the four family communication patterns.

Families in a Digital World

Every couple of decades, the tempo of our lives seems to speed up by a notch or two. My great-grandparents wrote diaries and long letters and looked forward to weekly social gatherings to be part of a community. Communication for this generation was predominantly face to face or possibly by way of the hand-delivered note. In my great-grandmother's day, there were no communication facilitators: no phones, no radios, no television—no entertainment channeled into their living room via a little black and white television screen. To while away the evening hours, they would play cards, read books, make music, and have earnest conversations. Today, the family that creates its own music is rare; it is more likely that one family member or another will make music happen with a telling command to a speaker-like device in the room—"I'd like to hear some relaxing music!"—and from somewhere "in the cloud," the correct selection is streamed into the home. Adrian Ward (2013), a researcher focusing on the influences exerted by a digitally connected world, poetically describes the cognitive challenges of this changing world:

We are creatures of flesh and blood, living in a world of bits and bytes—a world shaped by the Internet. With the simple touch of a button or swipe of a finger, we can instantaneously access vast amounts of information. . . . A few more keystrokes, and we can interact with friends 10 time zones away. . . . We know there was a time when encyclopedias represented the pinnacle of information storage and communicating with faraway friends required a trip to the post office . . . but such a time feels far removed from the present moment. (p. 341)

Digitally Connected

My first email, which I received in the early nineties, was a memorable event. A colleague announced that he would contact me by email but told me that I needed an email address—at the time, universities were early adopters of this new technology. The university technician guided me; the thought of receiving communication on a computer was astonishing. To this day, I remember the contents of that very first email: it was about magnolia trees, which bloomed in the South of the United States at that time of year.

Within months, email was no longer a novelty. We accessed it via telephone lines, using a modem with a distinct ringtone. Movies featured email communication as a prominent part of the plot. *You've Got Mail* (1998) was one of them; the storyline concerned an online romance. A digital era was beginning to replace the time in which communication and lifestyle moved at a slower face-to-face pace. As the innovations took over, deadlines shortened to become immediate. The excuse of “the check is in the mail” became redundant, as most things, including payments, could be transmitted instantaneously. There was no room to decompress or to extend time. Many transactions happened in real-time; there was hardly a gap between sending and receiving.

In an interview, researcher Adrian Ward states that the iPhone has been around for a decade plus and the Internet for about three decades (Meyer, 2017). These technologies have become so integral to daily tasks that we feel deprived without our electronic crutches. They have the potential to add positive as well as negative dimensions to our lives using this technology. We pretend to be in denial that our smartphones and the Internet can exacerbate our addictive tendencies.

If the family is viewed as a social system, communication takes place between all parties looped into that particular system. When social media is being treated as an active party that shares many of these communications, it considerably changes the dynamic within the family system. By allowing social media access to the privileged communications of a family, we open a window, allowing an entire private world to be seen by prying and anonymous eyes. If those who see posts share these with their friends, and these friends in turn share them several times more, the number of persons who can have access to the communication increases exponentially. When a message is shared repeatedly and widely enough, it can potentially reach millions of viewers. This sharing blurs the lines between privileged, personal information and public information.

In the early days of the Internet, people shared very personal items on the web. As users gained greater awareness of the risks associated with this sort of sharing, information has been edited, even curated, to a level of inauthenticity that makes online communications appear hollow and mass produced, at times. Being too public, social media have compromised those aspects of personal communication that are reserved for the privacy of a particular friendship or personal relationship.

Paradoxically, the family became less as well as more connected. Importantly, the nature of communication and connections changed. Communication devices aided communication, and smartphones allowed us to reach family members instantaneously by text or by video messaging. As much as this connected us, it also meant that our face-to-face interactions, those in which we are in the same place at the same time, decreased.

Children and digital content. Children need minimal exposure to succumb to the addictive lures of electronic entertainment. Relationships require time and investment: it is the dynamic of availability that, in turn, fosters healthy family relationships and mindful engagement. There is no shortcut, as quantity time is required to provide a quality relationship. No electronic screen should substitute

for ongoing parental involvement. If digital technology is used, it should be an additional way of connecting, it should occur in the appropriate context, and it should be supervised by a responsible adult.

Postmillennial children and adolescents are very familiar with using the web for entertainment as well as communication. If an entertainment website provides social interaction, it also serves as a social media site; numerous such sites are currently available, including gaming sites. Not all are desirable for children and adolescents. Ideally, parents should ensure that their children are not exposed to inappropriate content (O’Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). The online social platforms can have an addictive quality in that they spark our curiosity concerning our friends and acquaintances, and we return repeatedly for daily or even hourly updates.

True concern is appropriate if these electronic communications become a substitute for face-to-face communication. It is like replacing bread with candy floss. Bread is nurturing and part of our staple diet; candy floss is sweet and tempting, but it does not still hunger. Teenagers who rely on social media for a social life can get pulled into group comparisons, online competition, and a fake reality where everybody posts only their photoshopped selfies and edited content. It may look like real life, but it isn’t; it vanishes like candy floss on the tongue and does not fulfill the need for solid and authentic friendships and communications. The negative effects in terms of self-concept and competitiveness can lead to what has been labeled *Facebook depression* (O’Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). This refers to the negative self-image accompanied by depression that adolescents develop when they use a social platform as a point of comparison. Sophie Elmhirst (2019) provides an apt description of a millennial’s digitally connected world and how it affects the self-perceptions and expectations of this generation:

If you grow up online, you know what it is to be watched and how it feels to be heard, and how the more you are watched and heard, the more you want and need to be. Things don’t feel real until they’re shared or valid until you know what other people think about them. Your self becomes something to be recorded, posted, judged and, possibly, hopefully, monetised. You can be a brand, and maybe you should be. Deep in the guts of Instagram, there’s a sense of well-meaning frenzy—a race to prove that you feel and admire and suffer and love more than anyone else. And then there’s the unspoken quid pro quo: you like me and I like you.

This frenzied race to create and share and perhaps monetize an image of self can be risky on its own, and it sometimes pushes people toward even more risky sharing. Other risky online behavior includes sexting and viewing websites with inappropriate content, specifically with content pertaining to violence and sexuality. Cyberbullying has deservedly gained attention as a cause of concern and has resulted in several teenage deaths. Bullies tend to hide behind masks of anonymity. Cyber trolling, which aims vicious and destructive remarks at a victim, is also a worry.

Importantly, parents need to have a relationship of trust with their child or teenager, so that they can become confidantes if their child becomes a target of something out of the ordinary or a victim of negative online behavior. Some children and teens are so fearful of admitting that they have been victimized that they continue to meet the demands of the blackmailer, too afraid to confide in anyone.

Social media have been used by immigrant families to facilitate assimilation into the new culture. If immigrant teens spend excessive time immersed in online activities, on the other hand, it can signal that they are missing out on real-life friendships (Elias & Lemish, 2008). Even families using social media in

FOCUS POINT

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constructive ways have to ensure that the digital world does not become a substitute for all those shared family events during which face-to-face time strengthens bonds between family members—the regular family meals and celebrations, family reunions, bedtime stories, or picnics in the park.

Digitally connected. There are numerous times when this outside network can work to our advantage: for example, getting help online, when the 911 dispatcher talks us through an emergency or the remote physician helps the on-site doctor find a suitable intervention; learning online, when classrooms across geographical boundaries are electronically connected; and keeping in touch with family online, when family members are scattered across the globe. Digital technology facilitates many other helpful and productive communications as well. An entire generation can work remotely, thanks to connected communication networks. Clearly, there are great advantages, as long as we are aware of the challenges and our limited ability to deal simultaneously with multiple communication channels. As one researcher succinctly states,

When old cognitive tendencies and new technologies meet—when the world of flesh and blood collides with the world of bits and bytes—the Internet may act as a “supernormal stimulus,” hijacking preexisting cognitive tendencies and creating novel outcomes. (Ward, 2013, p. 341)

The Dynamics of a Digital World

Alternating between tasks. Cell phones have a way of reaching into our minds to siphon our attention surreptitiously and stealthily. We think we can focus on our physically present conversation partner; we place our cell phone face down—we may even silence it. But if it vibrates, it beckons us, and most of us cannot resist. We will glance at it, no matter where or with whom we are. Every time we succumb to that digital temptation, we break the communication loop of our current conversation; it's as if we step outside the room for a fraction of a minute.

Students in class toggle backward and forward between listening to the professor and glancing at their cell phones. At the risk of sounding old-fashioned, this seems like trying to dance with two partners—this one, then that one. It's surprising that neither party in the system complains. Would we tolerate it if we knew that the pilot flying our plane was also playing Fortnite? How about divided attention during surgery and intricate operations? Or the person controlling a crane or driving a car with a child in the backseat—should that person be reading at the same time? We know that simultaneously driving and texting is not safe; our human brains are not wired to multitask in this manner. What happens instead is more like alternating between tasks—not doing them simultaneously. Texting while driving

reduces our attention span and impairs our ability to react appropriately; yet we persist, probably because the lure of the cell phone is irresistible.

Because our brains are simply not set up to manage this type of multitasking, the quality of our conversation suffers when we try to divide our attention. Imagine having a counseling session with a therapist who repeatedly glances at her phone, or think about trying to talk with a clerk at a checkout counter who is distracted by incoming messages. Whenever we share our attention between two tasks making major cognitive demands, our brains alternate between tasks. They may do this numerous times, which gives us additional mental work and uses extra mental resources. Whatever we like to think we're doing, we pay a mental price when we divide our attention.

Daniel Oppenheimer, a psychologist, found that distraction applied to other areas beyond interaction with cell phones or technology: "Attractive objects draw attention, and it takes mental energy to keep your attention focused when a desirable distractor is nearby" (quoted in Meyer, 2017). For instance, persons on a diet might notice appetizing food, or smokers might be distracted by the availability of cigarettes. The upshot is that your smartphone can distract you even when it is turned off:

We know that cell phones are highly desirable, and that lots of people are addicted to their phones, so in that sense it's not surprising that having one visible nearby would be a drain on mental resources . . . given the prevalence of phones in modern society, that has important implications. (Oppenheimer, quoted in Meyer, 2017)

"They spend their leisure time staring into their phones."

Snigdha Poonam, *Dreamers: How Young Indians Are Changing the World* (2018)

Brain drain. In a publication with the catchy phrase "brain drain" in the title, Ward, Duke, Gneezy, and Bos (2017) state that our online connectedness encourages and reinforces constant access to people, entertainment, and information. They tested their hypothesis of "brain drain" in two experimental situations and reported on attention span differences between two groups of students taking a memory test. One group of participants left their phones on their desks or in their backpacks, set on silent mode or vibration. The second group of students left their cell phones outside the testing room. Students whose phones were out of the room paid greater attention to the memory tests. Ward et al. (2017) concluded that the mere presence of a cell phone, even on silent mode, was subtly distracting. Students did best when their cell phones were not tempting, when they were placed outside the room. These researchers conclude that

"Cognitive costs are highest for those highest in smart phone dependence."

Ward, Duke, Gneezy, and Bos (2017)

Being On Call for Our Smartphones

Calling our names. Smartphones are generally treated as the VIP guests in the room in that they hold our attention and we interrupt other activities to answer to their call. Ward et al. (2017, p. 3) state that certain cues capture our attention virtually immediately, as we are sensitized to them. One such cue is hearing our

Authentic Insight

Letters From the Past

Tidying up the attic at my grandparents' home, I came across a pile of letters, neatly bundled with lavender ribbon. Should I read them (after all they are private)? But as my grandparents had passed away, opening the letters beckoned me toward my own ancestry, and had an intensely personal urgency. The letters spanned the years of my grandparents' immigration to the new country; these letters told the tale of this couple going through the halls of Ellis Island, filled with expectancy and hope. What made their journey somewhat different is that my grandfather went a year ahead of my grandmother. He wanted to find a foothold before the family followed. The letters were numbered; my grandfather used even numbers and my grandmother, odd numbers to mark the sequence of the letters they sent. A letter might take as long as three to four weeks before it reached its destination, crossing the Atlantic between Europe and the New World. They managed that emotional and physical separation without an ongoing and continuous conversation, but at that time it was what it was.

My great-great-great-grandmother Angélique's cookbook from the early 1800s revealed the labor involved in producing a single meal. No electric oven with controlled temperatures was available; instead cooks relied on an open fire and guesswork or experience. One of the recipes contains instructions on how to skin a rabbit. My great-grandmother Angélique Marie, living in the early 1900s, did not have an indoor bathroom. Once a week, a washtub was dragged into the kitchen and filled with hot water, so family members could take

their consecutive weekly baths—turn by turn. We take so many aspects of modern living for granted, including running water, controllable indoor temperatures, transport, an abundance of safe and healthy food, and, of course, reliable and virtually instantaneous communication.

My grandmother experienced World Wars I and II. Her life was not filled with the comforts of modern living. The attic space was reserved for storing potatoes and apples throughout the ice-cold winter. Whenever she wanted an apple, she had to pick the blemished ones first, a habit that persisted into postwar years. A fridge was unknown, and the diets were monotonous. The war years were filled with deprivation. Because everybody was in the same boat, families supported each other and shared their hardships as well as their resources.

The family in my great-grandparents' time was closely connected, and the radius of family members' daily movements was much smaller—about five miles in any direction. We easily commute 30 miles plus without blinking. As a child, I took a bus to commute seven miles and then another five city blocks to reach school. We were three youngsters travelling and walking together; my parents were not concerned about us finding our way and trusted in an environment that seemed relatively safer for unaccompanied children. As parents today, we hover and protect, sometimes knowing exactly where each child is through cell phone tracking. Times have changed, as have our concerns about safety and so many other expectations reaching all the corners of our existence.

own name or spotting our name in print. The recognition is instantaneous; we are so alert to it that it jumps out at us. Cell phones are said to have a similar hold over us; they put us on mental standby. What does that do for our ability to pay attention to other things? If our attention is limited (which it is), then it will be affected by these constant interruptions. Even the anticipation of receiving a communication or text can distract us. As Meyer (2017) states,

If you grow dependent on your smartphone, it becomes a magical device that silently shouts your name at your brain at all times. (Now remember that this magical shouting device is the most popular consumer product ever made. In the developed world, almost everyone owns one of these magical shouting devices and carries it around with them everywhere.)

“We are creatures of flesh and blood, living in a world of bits and bytes—a world shaped by the Internet.”

Adrian Ward (2013)

Dynamics of Content and Context

Much debate has focused on the interaction between quantity and quality time. Some contend that if the quality of the time we spend connecting to others is particularly good it can override deficits in the quantity of time we spend. Pressured parents like to think that even though they are away from children all day, the “quality time” they spend reading a nightly bedtime story will make up for that separation. In reality, the formula is not as simple as quantity versus quality, and there are numerous contextual factors that influence the perception of this ratio. One aspect is the age of the participants in that relationship. To a young child, both concepts, the quality of the time spent and the length of the time separated, may be too abstract to comprehend.



This rare image depicts wigged men drinking beverages while reading papers. Staying in the loop in the seventeenth century meant visiting coffeehouses, reading newspapers, and attending to gossip. The twenty-first-century equivalents in terms of social culture would be visiting coffeehouses (still), getting news from the Internet, and checking social websites and texted gossip.

Source: Public domain.

Digitally supporting face-to-face communication. Segrin and Flora (2011, pp. 48–49) summarize a number of studies that examine long-distance relationships and the effect of separation on the quality of those relationships. It would appear that for couples who go into this type of situation knowingly and voluntarily, or alternatively understand the necessity of it, the relationship can be managed. The ongoing thread of past and future shared activities will add to relationship cohesion. As long as there is some form of face-to-face electronic communication to link the two individuals during periods of separation, the quality of the relationship does not appear to be adversely influenced. Some examples of such relationships would be military couples, graduate students pursuing their degrees at different universities, long-distance romances, and couples with international work demands. Expats and immigrants and others who need to live away from home face separation as well.

Relationships can be kept alive and flourishing if there are opportunities for contact and conversation. Modern communication methods—for example, email, FaceTime, cell phones—can build communication bridges that are effective as long as the separation is not indefinite. Another aspect addressed by the same authors is whether shared activities will strengthen relationships. Again, the answer depends on the context. Watching a football game if one party is disinterested is not going to strengthen that relationship. The shared interest, the mutual enthusiasm creates a bond between people participating in a shared activity.

Some parents remark that driving their children to school and attending their sport activities and games are ways of bringing the family closer together. The family that celebrates successes together and offers support during crises *will* strengthen its communication and, in turn, fortify family members’ emotional bonds by virtue of these activities.

Conformity. Families can create a particular family climate that demands buy-in by all members; for instance, the group expects members to be like-minded when it comes to values, attitudes, and beliefs. It is quite possible that the dominant figures within the family will influence the younger and more pliable members. Through this influence, used in a constructive manner, families impart values, ethics, and belief systems to their children and socialize them. This socialization, in turn, allows children to find their niche in society, the place where they can meet and understand the rules and demands of that particular context. Parents guide children toward appropriate self-regulation, so their children's behavior is acceptable in social contexts.

When children are exposed to authoritarian parents who demand that they conform to parental standards, including the family's belief system, these children will, in all likelihood, be shaped by these demands and conform. Seguin and Flora (2011, p. 51) summarize several research studies dealing with this topic. It would appear that children who have been in high-conformity environments tend to also conform to peer pressure. When it comes to destructive trends, such as drug use, vaping, swearing, promiscuity, and other risk-taking behavior, we hope that appropriate parental guidelines continue to be a reference point, despite peer influences.

Seguin and Flora (2011, p. 51) quote research on whether the education, employment, and social assets of parents influence the conformity or nonconformity of their children. Parents who act in an individualistic, nonconforming, and creative manner tend to work in environments valuing these qualities, and these parents may be tolerant and encouraging of similar behavior in their offspring. The type of communication patterns that are acceptable in the home environment may be generalized to other situations as well, including work. Parents generally act in the best interests of their own children, and the majority of parents try to socialize their children in ways that will lead to best outcomes.

Communication signals. Families can send signals concerning what is regarded as appropriate or inappropriate communication. Families in which parents model criticism consider this acceptable behavior in the offspring. There is not much guessing as to how these children developed in adulthood. They felt entitled to be critical and judgmental, qualities that contribute little to social contexts. Similarly, if hurtful jokes are the norm and sarcasm and biting jokes are acceptable in the family, the stage may be set for bullying behavior, especially if the potential bully is low on empathy and does not reflect on how a so-called joke at the expense of someone else's feelings may feel to the victim.

Communication and prejudice. Social psychology tells us that prejudice and stereotypes are typically modeled not only by parents but also by the close circle of friends with whom an individual interacts. Prejudice and stereotypes are learned behaviors; as the general opinions of a group of people change and evolve over time, so will the nature of the prejudices and stereotypes. It is especially disconcerting that prejudice stands between congruent and bidirectional conversation. Prejudgment is one of the toxic ways of harming a conversation or communication because the prejudiced person will neither hear nor see the entire spectrum of what is communicated. Biased people tend to foreclose connections and fill in the missing information with preconceived ideas, which may be incorrect.

To promote cultural competence, we need to be alert to what is being communicated and try to prevent prejudice from influencing the quality of communication. To display cultural competence, one has to be open to what the other has to say, willing to hear that person's side of the story. We can learn from each other. Cultural competence does not mean that we have to know everything about another culture; instead, it requires us to be open to the learning opportunity

FOCUS POINT

The world of digital media offers great advantages; computers have irrevocably changed our society and our communications. We may be limited by our inability to juggle multiple communication channels simultaneously. Cell phones put us on mental standby, diverting

our attention. Our attention span is affected by constant interruptions. Parents set the tone for what is happening in the home. Digital technology and social media and related communication patterns have the ability to influence family dynamics.

represented by another cultural context. It is valuable and extends both our world and our cultural comfort zones.

It is important to remember that many aspects of communication, especially those related to peer pressure such as the drive to conform or the development of models of behavior, prejudices and stereotypes, or cultural competence, remain the same in the digital world. In fact, social media can enhance the power of one's circle of friends, making the influence of peers on communication even more significant.

Family Rituals in a Digital World

One of the key qualities of emotionally healthy families is that members celebrate and support each other. To do so, they may follow certain rituals that can be influenced by societal and cultural contexts. Jokes about ageing can lend a humorous touch, making significant birthdays easier to manage. These jokes may be acceptable rituals in North America, where roasting someone on the occasion of a 50th birthday is seen as well-intentioned fun. But they would not be in Germany or Japan, where more formality and respect for the elderly are the norms.

Nevertheless, sharing celebratory rituals and offering support during times of hardship stabilize the family unit. Being close during times of joy and sorrow adds strength and resilience to the family unit while also easing any transition, say from adolescence to adulthood or from married man to widower. Besides bringing support, shared celebrations are profoundly protective for participants. Because these gatherings are so important to the health of families, family dynamics are significantly affected if digital media replace or alter long-standing family rituals.

Escapism and distraction. As televisions entered our homes, it set off a domino effect, and other family-related activities changed. Yet another such wave is occurring as our communications and entertainments move to digital platforms and media.

Consider how a child's playtime has changed recently. Playtime with real objects and playmates stimulates and allows expression of the child's creativity while expanding and challenging motor, cognitive, interactive, and communication skills. It addresses several dimensions simultaneously: the physical, the social, the emotional, and the mental. When playtime is replaced by screen time, many of these dimensions are left out. For example, online gaming for teenagers can be a solitary pursuit even if played with online teams. Controlled and appropriate gaming can have a place in the total spectrum of entertainment, but we need to be aware that it also has addictive qualities and can lure loners, especially, into its fantasy world.

Moving into the virtual world. We all must learn to express and manage hostility and anger appropriately. Both tasks require self-regulation and social insight concerning the outcomes and implications of our behaviors. In the fantasy world, highly aggressive games can be played without actual consequence; it is easy to pull a trigger on an imaginary target. If the lines between reality and fantasy fade, the aggression of imaginary game playing can be transferred to real-life social situations. Numerous social tragedies have occurred because teens and adults have brandished guns with neither insight nor training on responsible use in supervised contexts. The real world is treated like a computer game, and the boundaries between fantasy and reality disappear.

Research has addressed major societal concerns linked to online media use and abuse (Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012; O’Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). One hopes that families will act responsibly and teach children about the dangers of inappropriate weapon use. Acting out hostility may seem like a powerful stance, but indiscriminate and random aggression creates devastation. For adolescents who tend to be loners and socially isolated, becoming immersed in online gaming risks exacerbating the potential of antisocial behavior.

Creativity. Playtime is a time for creativity and exploration. Teenagers and children can explore their worlds somewhat independently and in an age-appropriate manner, which supports taking age-appropriate responsibility in certain contexts. Parental involvement is crucial, as parents who display and model responsible behavior become the role models for their children. Creativity demands uninterrupted time and a place to explore. For instance, artistic creativity requires skill acquisition as well as exposure. To reach a level of proficiency that makes it fun to play an instrument, paint something, dance, write a poem, or otherwise create requires an investment in terms of time and practice.

Creativity needs to be nurtured in order to be expressed; it is difficult for creativity to grow if there is neither time nor encouragement. Excessive participation in the world of social media can draw us into a fantasy world that makes us passive and unmotivated, exactly the opposite from the proactivity required for creativity to blossom. By responding to every alert from a cell phone, we turn our day into an endless chain of interruptions, which is poison to the luxury of uninterrupted and consistent thinking time.

As much as social media has opened and expanded our worlds, allowed us to communicate across continents and cultures, we need to be aware of its addictive quality—it can consume our lives and leave us emotionally empty. It takes self-discipline to harness social media, to use its benefits without being bewitched by its darker side.

One benefit is that the digital world allows us to consolidate our knowledge base through the summation of various sources of knowledge (e.g., *Wikipedia*). According to Wegner and Ward (2013, p. 309), in an article with the catchy title “How Google Is Changing Your Brain,” our memories may be affected by online sourcing in that we may find it difficult to distinguish between what we once found online and what constitutes our personal memories. A fusion of information and a blurring of boundaries between various domains may occur, which also subtly influences our personal memories. In another publication, Ward (2013) states that accessing information from the Internet can influence our personal memory banks:

The Internet is a consistent presence in people’s daily lives. As people upload, download, and offload information to and from this cloud mind, the line between people’s own minds and the cloud mind of the Internet may become increasingly blurry. (Ward, 2013)

GLOBAL GLIMPSE

DIGITAL WORLDS: JUNK FOOD FOR OUR MINDS

Sitting on the porch enjoying a cup of freshly brewed Earl Grey tea, I was surprised when a bird-swarm settled in our yard: a murmuration. Not hundreds, but thousands of birds were simultaneously twittering at an overwhelming volume:

It's called a murmuration—the bird dance, an aerial ballet with tens of thousands of starlings, grackles, cowbirds and red-wing blackbirds flying in mass but seemingly with one mind. Watching it can be mesmerizing—it's a twisting, swirling, morphing, shape-shifting living cloud. (Bob Gathany, as quoted in Flanagan, 2017)

My thought was that if just a portion of the voices on the Internet became audible, this would be the noise and attention they generated. I claim no prize for connecting with this thought the concepts of *Twitter* and *tweets*, such aptly chosen names for the electronic chattering, for our new way of voicing a thought, any thought, uncensored and impulsive, and sending it instantaneously into the universe to be retweeted and amplified.

Lured by a digital world. Journalist Snigdha Poonam interviewed dozens of millennials in her home country, India, and their stories form the core of her book *Dreamers: How Young Indians Are Changing Their World and Yours* (2018). India's population has nearly hit the billion mark, a great number accompanied by even greater challenges. The majority of the population is under the age of 25, and these youngsters are ensnared by the digital world. They are influenced by the lure of materialism and sensationalism and are making it their business to get a share of the pie. Quick rewards, no matter how achieved or which rules are broken—these end goals can supersede “nuisance” variables such as truth, morals, and ethics. Who cares that the person clicking is uninformed and curious enough to take the bait. The back cover of Poonam's book describes this phenomenon:

In a country that is increasingly characterized by ambition and crushing limitations, this is a generation that cannot—and will not—be defined on anything but their own terms. They are wealth-chasers,

hucksters, and fame-hunters, desperate to escape their narrow prospects. They are the dreamers. . . . From dubious entrepreneurs to political aspirants, from starstruck strivers to masterly swindlers, these are the clickbaiters who create viral content for Facebook and the Internet scammers who stalk you at home. (Poonam, 2018)

The battle of the click. Poonam visited the headquarters of a company churning out viral content for various media platforms. It is all about how many clicks and likes creators of content can ratchet up; they live and breathe for the split-second attention span of some global reader who is reeled in by curiosity, clicks on their stories, and swallows the half-truths they create. The game is on. Will the bait on the hook attract the indiscriminating victim? The game is aptly called “clickbait.” There are some tricks to the trade. In this particular company, the content creators are all young with minimal higher education; they follow their gut feeling concerning what is sensational, what speaks to our feelings of shame, what attracts our secret curiosity, what appeals to the voyeurism of the online audience.

Reeling us in. They use words with high emotional content, words not suitable to be printed on this page. They generate lists of make-believe problem solvers, such as “Five things to melt belly fat”—all is fair game in the battle for the click. One interviewee in Poonam's book describes himself as not displaying the dedication to succeed at programming. Consequently, he turned to the Internet and began developing content, and this opened a world of possibilities for him. His interest became an obsession but also brought financial rewards. At the Delhi headquarters of some sensational content-producing site, he and other young entrepreneurs are glued to screens displaying the number of visits to their content at any given time; numbers run into the thousands, with 82 million visits monthly and 1.5 billion page views (Poonam, 2018, p. 5).

Global educational outcomes. If we translate this one site's 1.5 billion page views into time units, how many millions upon millions of hours are wasted clicking away? If these readers were using that same time to open their textbooks, go to school, study for

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their tests (as spoken by a biased academic), what a significant difference it would make to global educational outcomes. But then maybe I am naïve: the textbook does not have the same allure as the potentially illicit or gossipy headlines that beckon in an irresistible manner.

Another disconcerting fact is that, according to Poonam (2018), much of this content is not written by experts in the field; rather, it is written by millennials with limited education and experience. How did it happen that we lend an ear to what is potentially disinformation? And then, going a step further,

do we end up believing what is untrue and possibly rearranging our lives to accommodate it? We face an onslaught of promotional material whose primary goal is to transfer money (and its accompanying power) from our pockets into theirs.

“It is a combat zone of sorts, an electronic and digital war that crosses boundaries and cultures; and we freely let the enemy into our homes and, even scarier, into our minds.”

Sources: Poonam (2018); see also Flanagan (2017).

Impressionable Minds of the Young

The thoughtful and controlled use of screen time can be enriching in select circumstances. There is a clear educational application that can be used to advantage. The flipside is that very young children (those under the age of three) should not be exposed to unsupervised and extended screen time, including television time. Early childhood is a period of very rapid and sensitive brain development; so the nature and content of the stimulation must be considered, and children should be protected from indiscriminate exposure to web-based and digital material. The American Academy of Pediatrics has published an insightful document on young children’s media use and communication. It offers specific guidelines for parents, who should be the ones regulating a child’s media exposure. Importantly, the document emphasizes shared media time, when parents and children watch select programming together (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2016b).

Even when children are slightly older, adults in supervising roles should mediate the timing and content of media exposure; and maintaining an interpersonal context remains crucial, while also allocating sufficient opportunities for other activities that are developmentally appropriate and healthy.

Once children go to school, they will be exposed to the appropriate use of tablets and computers in controlled settings so that technology can be a constructive tool for learning and communication. Some young children (aged one to five years) have been known to throw temper tantrums if their access to social media is limited or cut off. This can be difficult for families, and parents are hesitant to intervene, especially if the tantrum occurs in public. Parents need to be aware of the risks of ongoing and excessive screen time. It is helpful to pause screen time at a natural stopping point.

Some parents make use of a timer on their own cell phones to indicate a child’s remaining minutes of screen time. When the timer rings, the parent is able to help the child transition to other activities. According to Hiniker, Suh, Cao, and Kientz (2016) technology-mediated transitions are significantly more successful than parent-mediated transitions. Parents can also help a child use technologies to set boundaries and define limits, for instance, by having the child use an electronic timer that indicates when daily screen time is almost finished. A child who self-audits screen time has learned an important lesson and benefited from good parenting techniques. Always remember, though, that screen time should not take on the role of an electronic babysitter.

According to research by Kabali et al. (2015), the age at which children first use media is becoming progressively younger, and “first use” is often in the first year of life. Parents have various reasons for letting their children play with mobile

devices. Those of us who have taken care of young children can identify with many of these challenges. For instance, a parent might hand over a cell phone to keep the child calm and amused while travelling, waiting in a restaurant, or visiting a public place. Surprisingly, almost a quarter of questioned parents in another research study admitted to using a mobile device to put their children to sleep, probably by playing lullabies but not exposing them to screen time. These same authors stated that virtually all households had some form of access to cell phones, tablets, computers, or television. By age two, many children could use the swiping movement to change images on the screen of a cell phone or tablet.

The more prevalent use of these technologies by children and the growing number of hours they spend in front of a screen can damage their health. For example, screen time affects sleep patterns; devices cause interruptions, exacerbating short attention spans; and sitting in front of a computer means not moving or being physically active, which in turn encourages obesity. Exposure to inaccurate and inappropriate content is always troubling, and privacy concerns persist (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2016a).

Relevant and appropriate information is powerful, on the other hand. Because information is so freely available, both the good and the bad can enter our homes through our laptops and screens. Appropriately used, the Internet can be a helpful resource that allows us to check facts, learn a skill, and so much more. It requires some education to be able to distinguish between solid information and misinformation. A middle-schooler randomly accessing websites could be flooded with harmful misinformation. There are predators who make it their business to lure minors into compromising situations from which the children struggle to extract themselves. Ultimately, a child's uneducated and unrestricted use of the Internet can potentially precipitate significant long-term harm.

The “me” generation. In the age of the selfie, we can go down the rabbit hole of egocentric behavior; it's all about me, myself, and I. Because we can take selfies, it is easy to make ourselves the center point. We have a captive audience if we post online. This level of self-absorption is unhealthy and distracting and can certainly influence family dynamics as well as how we communicate with others. People have died chasing the unique selfie—falling off a cliff, getting hit by a train, or being mauled by a wild animal. Surely no picture is so important that it should endanger our lives.

Theories. The family communication patterns theory is appropriate to address aspects such as when and how families communicate and in what contexts. If the media are included, this adds another dimension to the communication patterns. This theory does not provide a value judgment as to whether the allocation of time is appropriate or not; instead it describes family communication within a given context (Koerner, Schrodtt, & Fitzpatrick, 2018). What happens within families, the quality of their relationships, and how these affect family members will translate to the next level of societal functioning.



Although digital technologies bring clear educational benefits, families should be proactive in balancing digital and real-life experiences from birth to adulthood. For the children pictured here, who are six and older, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that parents “set media use limits that factor in other health-promoting activities such as physical activity, sleep, family meals, school, and friends” (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2016c).

Source: © iStock.com/monkeybusinessimages.

“The family occupies a central position in the lives of individuals and is humanity’s most enduring and most fundamental social institution.”

Koerner and Schrodt (2014, p. 1)

FOCUS POINT

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time, including television time. Early childhood is a period of very rapid and sensitive brain development for the young; so the nature and content of a child’s stimulation must be considered, and children should be protected from indiscriminate exposure to web-based and digital material.

Authentic Insight

Transition Generation

My grandfather told me how he and his eight siblings would gather around the radio to tune in to their favorite sitcoms. To an extent technology has always been an immersive experience, and for my generation (born around the Millennium) digital technology has been both a burden and a benefit.

Because my generation grew up during the transition into the digital era, we are very adept with technology. By the age of three, I could rewind a VHS tape, and at eleven I was showing my mother how to use her cell phone. Touchscreen devices took us to a whole new level. As my cohort matured, digital technology advanced with lightning speed.

Growing up in the early 2000s, change was a consistent factor. We have to process something in order to fully comprehend it. With rapidly advancing technology, few were able to stay ahead of the frequent changes. Well, no one except for the children. Kids are resilient and adaptive. Sponge-like, they absorb whatever surrounds them. As children of the early 2000s, we were immersed in constantly evolving technology. While some adults struggled to grasp the basic features of a device, as children we learned by osmosis. We were conditioned to accept the tech world’s changing nature; we could navigate this transitional environment.

We adapted socially to living in a digital-based society. Extensive conversations are a thing of the past, and texting is our main form of

communication. We meet people online, we talk to people online, and we spend the majority of our days online. Yes, we have adapted and learned to accept the prominence of technology in our society, but as a result, technology is consuming the majority of our day-to-day lives.

We have the whole world at our fingertips, yet we go out less frequently to physically experience things; after all, virtual reality lets us experience the world in a simpler, two-dimensional way. Sitting in a coffee shop, I am surrounded by friends and strangers all focused on their laptops and tablets.

Current society is centered on screens of all shapes and sizes. Yet we attempt to have personal connections with others. So, we incorporate socializing with the indispensable use of our electronic gadgets. We can’t have our cake and eat it too, but we think we can, as we navigate our lives through a technological maze. We have withdrawal symptoms if the Wi-Fi reception lets us down; could that possibly be a sign of addiction? Personally, I’ll take the bad with the good, and in the appropriate context, technology can be beneficial and powerful. I cannot imagine life without it, maybe the true sign that I am a Millennial. The genie is out of the bottle and there is no going back.

Jordan Dombrowski majored in human development and family science.

Family Communication Networks

Mediated interaction. Postmillennial communication has been heavily influenced by what has been called **mediated interaction**, or communication using media. For instance, emails, texts, posted photos, social media communications, and the like: these media interactions are instantaneous and connect a wide range of people, who are not all part of a “friend” network. By the same token, they can become public, and one has to be intentional about whom to include in communication.

Yet in spite of our choosing which circles of friends we want to include and with whom we want to communicate, we can send numerous unintended or unintentional communications. For instance, friends of friends on social platforms may be able to see the content we posted. There are ways of restricting access, but the communicator has to be very intentional and knowledgeable about putting boundaries in place.

When social connections occur through digital media, the influences on interactions and relationships are far-reaching. An advantage is that social media give us the ability to maintain acquaintances and friendships in far-flung places. Because of this extended network, we can find childhood friends, long-lost relatives, and acquaintances we barely met. Additionally, through the suggestions of the social media site itself, we can be connected to friends of friends. This technology creates a very wide network of people whom we can contact but with whom we cannot possibly maintain true friendships.

Some social media and web platforms have been overtaken by consumerist motives, making them advertising and marketing platforms more than networks of friends. Hence, one has to battle through the 90 percent of material that is irrelevant to see the 10 percent that is of interest. There are clear intergenerational differences in the use of these social media platforms. Interestingly, the older generation enjoys networking with grandchildren and discovering school friends after many years. Social media and the connectedness provided by cell phones, online chats, and the like allow family members to communicate almost instantaneously and to document moments from their lives to share, which keeps the elderly and the extended family in the loop. Forming social circles on social media sites can help an individual maintain contact with subgroups; for instance, all the cousins from one family can create their own group and remain connected.

Undoubtedly, this new electronic and web-based communication has had far-reaching implications. It has changed the dating scene, and numerous relationships begin online. It has allowed us to maintain a wide circle of acquaintances and follow their lives from a distance as onlookers—a double-edged sword, as social media users can become abusers, stalking and possibly harassing people online. Indeed, each benefit of our digitally connected world seems linked to a drawback. Our friendships may be wide, but they lack depth. Our communications may be numerous and instantaneous, but they are also ephemeral and often superficial or even commercial, lacking thought and attention to the individual.

We can see these changes in the artifacts of communication. The handwritten card or letter has largely been replaced by group emails. Holiday cards, invitations, and even wedding announcements are increasingly electronic. Of course, there will be numerous exceptions but the electronic option is alive and well. There is something charming and permanent about the old-school handwritten card, and it is more likely to be preserved, under special circumstances, than the electronic card. Of course, communicating online in real-time is very useful and instantaneous. But what if families stop having conversations, and touch base mainly via text messages? These are abbreviated communications, almost like punctuation marks. Clearly, we cannot go back in time. But we can try to take the best from

both worlds and use modern technology in appropriate contexts while maintaining a place for face-to-face communication and time spent in each other's company.

Netiquette

With new communication methods come new rules. Texting in capital letters is regarded as shouting. The use of acronyms, which seem to change with each season, is a byproduct of texting. Formal forms of address fall by the wayside, and the new replacements such as *Hey* seem overly familiar to older generations.

Communicating electronically, especially through social media, creates a public "track record" of what was communicated; posts can be retrieved and quoted or misquoted in contexts not intended by the sender. It is wise to check those hastily written texts and emails to make sure that the message is professional and represents what was intended. With this ease of communication, we can be tempted to send something into the world impulsively. Once it has been sent, there is no "unsending" it. Knowing that even our most impulsive communications could become part of our public story changes how we communicate and how much detail we send via these types of communication channels.

The etiquette of dating has been influenced by digital communication as well. Persons who break up after a relationship have to figure out to what extent they will leave not only each other's lives but also each other's online personas. A whole new genre of advice has grown around these topics. One practice is unfriending someone with whom you want to split, removing that person from a list of social media contacts. Or you could simply ghost that person by keeping the connection but not responding to any of her or his communications. Doing either may seem like a convenient solution to the person initiating the breakup, as it avoids the challenging breakup conversation. The person being jilted, however, may appreciate clarification, especially if that person is still vested in the relationship. Depending on how long the relationship lasted, a face-to-face breakup would display greater integrity than disappearing without a word. A face-to-face conversation may be advisable even if this has to be done in the presence of a mediator.

Noncommunication may seem an effective way of sending a message, but it may not be the most constructive way out. Undoubtedly new rules and guidelines will develop as we go along.

Multicultural Contexts

We can anticipate that culture will influence the type of conversations we have. But we must remember that cultures are made up of individuals, so broad cultural generalizations only take us so far. Also, cultures, families, and individuals exist within changing times, so the communications of the younger generation will not exactly mirror those of older generations.

Still, culture affects communication. Intercultural research looking at family communication patterns and conflict styles in Chinese families found that Chinese family communication patterns, which were more conformity oriented than those in other cultural contexts, encouraged collaborating and accommodating behavior in children (Zhang, 2007). These children did not have to be competitive or avoidant in their relationships with their parents. As a parenting style, this approach has the same qualities or characteristics as an authoritative (or constructive and positive) parenting approach. Because children are not required to be overly conforming while there is also a warm, accepting orientation toward communication, these types of families are likely to collaborate. In terms of family functioning, these are characteristics associated with a healthy family.

Feedback loops. How we communicate is ultimately influenced by a number of interacting factors. One of them is how other people react to what we say and how we say it; responses can strengthen us in certain patterns or give us cues to avoid communicating in a particular manner. Communication patterns are also modeled and influenced by the examples of significant persons in our lives; hence, families and close peer groups may imitate aspects of each other's interactions and communications.

Communication and global concerns. The ripple effect of the digital world has left virtually no corner of interactional dynamics untouched. Here are some areas in which shifts have occurred:

- *Privilege and power.* Changes have occurred to women's education and roles, gender roles, gay rights, cultural and diversity rights, and power relations, including an increase in the imbalance between the privileged few and the underprivileged many, which is linked to diminishing economic opportunities and the challenges of poverty.
- *Societal influences.* Currently, materialistic values have swept across nations, with e-commerce fueling consumption. How sustainable is the economic growth model?
- *Family dynamics.* Families are embedded in a society that is changing dramatically: can each generation keep up with the next generation?
- *Dynamics of leisure.* How does our diminishing leisure time affect self-reflection, self-insight, and quality of life? There is no downtime, no time lapse; all is instantaneous (the dynamics of leisure).
- *Making a difference.* The reward of volunteering has been enhanced by our broader social connections, more detailed and varied social perspectives, and the social comparisons the digital world enables, which can lead to gratitude and self-reflection.

The Dynamics of Change

Social change theories propose that once major changes occur, there is no going back; one cannot undo the awareness of what that paradigm shift elicits. The digital revolution that we have experienced since the early 1990s is such a shift; it has created a world we could not have envisioned. As Rosenau (1990, pp. 4–5) states,

If one senses that exploding technologies and expanding interdependencies are of great moment, then one must suspend normal standards of evidence long enough to consider alternative interpretations of what may be at work on the global scene.

Like Pandora opening the box, we have been confronted with all kinds of unanticipated surprises. The ripple effect has been major and has left very little untouched as it rolled our way—into our homes and into our minds.

“Spread out and examine the patterns of events, and you will find yourself face to face with the new scheme of being, hitherto unimaginable by the human mind.”

H. G. Wells, English author, especially of science fiction (1866–1946), from *Mind at the End of Its Tether*

FOCUS POINT

We can anticipate that culture influences the type and nature of our conversations. As younger generations are exposed to digital and other social media, some of the attention has shifted away from the family unit. Millennials are becoming increasingly self-focused and peer-referenced. How we communicate is influenced by a number

of interacting factors, including how other people react to what we say and how we say it. Communication patterns are also modeled and influenced by the examples of significant persons in our lives; hence, families and close peer groups may imitate aspects of each other's interactions and communications.

HISTORIC GLIMPSE

THE ART OF CONVERSATION

Here are twelve golden rules from over a century ago, published in *The Art of Conversation: Twelve Gold Rules* by Josephine Turck Baker (1907). In this little gem of a book (unearthed at a library book sale), Baker guides the reader concerning basic rules for easy and respectful conversation. It was written before the advent of the radio, the telephone, or the television. Clearly, conversation was valued as the social art of whiling away time. It was a form of entertainment that deserved cultivation and skill. Although enumerated for an earlier generation, most of these rules are equally applicable today; there is always a place for active listening, for tact, and for genuine interest—not much has changed when it comes to being respectful of the conversation partner and displaying genuine interest.

Twelve Golden Rules of Conversation

1. Avoid unnecessary details (p. 9).
2. Do not ask question number two until question number one has been answered; and, furthermore, one must be neither too curious nor too disinterested; that is, one must not ask too few nor too many questions (p. 13).
3. Do not interrupt another while he is speaking (p. 14).
4. Do not contradict another, especially when the subject under discussion is of trivial importance (p. 20).
5. Do not do all the talking; give your tired listener a chance (p. 24).
6. Be not continually the hero of your own story; and, on the other hand, do not leave your story without a hero (p. 29).
7. Choose [a] subject of mutual interest (p. 33).
8. Be a good listener (p. 38).
9. Make your speech in harmony with your surroundings (p. 45).
10. Do not exaggerate (p. 49).
11. Indulge occasionally in a relevant quotation, but do not garble it (p. 54).
12. Cultivate tact (p. 57).

Baker (1907/1919, p. 54) also suggests that we commit interesting passages in verse and prose to memory, which we can insert in our conversations for greater interest. Baker quotes from an article written in 1872 by Vernon Lushington titled "Learning by Heart"; the article was quite well known because it was included in *The Sixth Reader* by Lewis B. Monroe, dean of the Boston University School of Oratory. Monroe wrote a series of readers for schools, books designed to perfect the reading skills of pupils. The article reiterates the importance of memorizing "relevant quotations" and describes their usefulness in contexts other than conversation:

They may come to us in our dull moments, to refresh us as with spring flowers; in our selfish musings, to win us by pure delight from the tyranny of foolish castle-building, self-congratulations, and mean anxiety. They may be with us in the workshop, in the crowded streets, by the fireside; sometimes, perhaps, on pleasant hill-sides, or by sounding shores;—noble friends and companions—our own! never intrusive, ever at hand, coming at our call. (Lushington, quoted in Monroe, 1872, p. 166)

In a more current source, namely an interview by Jolie Kerr with Terry Gross of National Public Radio (NPR), Gross summed up her guidelines for insightful interviews. Her most favored opening line in an interview is “Tell me about yourself,” also known as “the only ice-breaker you’ll ever need” (Kerr, 2018). After this initial invitation, it is up to the interviewee to direct the conversation toward areas that she or he finds comfortable and is willing to share. By

listening very carefully, the interviewer will be able to pick up the threads that deserve further exploration. Body language, humor, and curiosity are other key ingredients for a rich conversation. Importantly, Gross prepares for interviews so that she is well informed concerning the person with whom she will be having this in-depth conversation. She displays a genuine interest and a listening ear: a winning combination.

Sources: Baker (1907/1919); Kerr (2018); and Monroe (1872).



The (Great) Tower of Babel, by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1563). In the Bible story about the Tower of Babel, people were talking in so many tongues that they could not understand each other and could not collaborate in building their tower. An estimated 6,500 languages are spoken in our modern world. Even if we speak the same language, we can still fail to communicate.

Source: Public domain.

SPOTLIGHT ON THEORIES

Family Communication Patterns Theory

Braithwaite and Baxter (2006), the editors of a book on family communication, state the following concerning family communication patterns theory, which is partly attributed to the work of Mary Anne Fitzpatrick (2004):

Family communication patterns theory takes a view of communication that is both cognitive and interpersonal. The theory grows out of mass media research, built on earlier work from

(Continued)

(Continued)

cognitive psychology . . . it is concerned with causal explanation of why people communicate the way they do based on cognitive orientations in family relationships (p. 50)

In essence, this theory is based on the premise of the interaction between two dimensions, namely, conversation and conformity. See Diagram 8.1. These dimensions echo the general work concerning parenting styles, which fluctuate between the axes of nurture and structure (Gerhardt, in Bigner & Gerhardt, 2019, p. 47). See Diagram 8.2.

- **Conversation** refers to the verbal interaction that takes place between family members and to their willingness to discuss topics. If related to parenting, conversation would be the axis relating to the nurture or the emotional

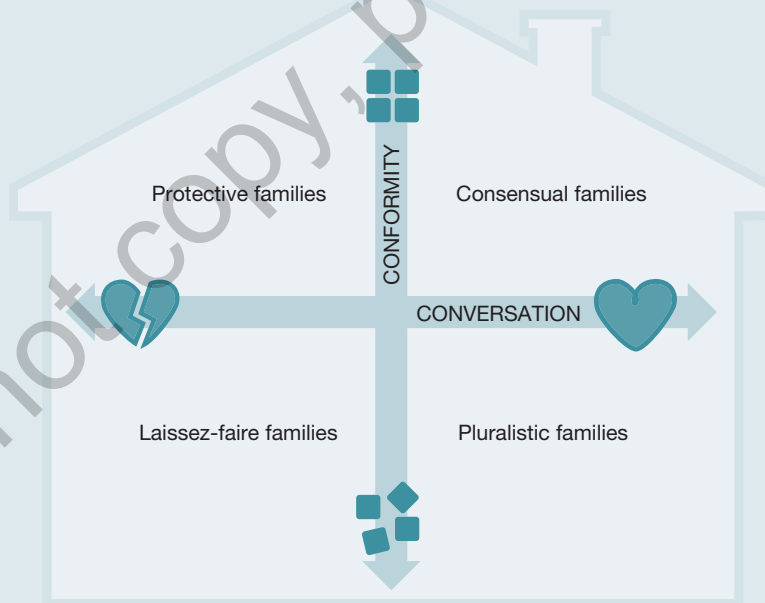
expressiveness displayed in family relationships.

- **Conformity** refers to the extent family members subscribe to the same values, attitudes, and beliefs. If related to parenting, conformity would be the axis relating to the structure (or control) displayed in family relationships.

Based on these two dimensions of conversation (nurture) and conformity (structure/control), a model of family communication patterns is created. It would appear that the processes that are described are similar in the two disciplines of psychology and communication science, but the terminology differs. The visual representation of these quadrants also allows us to consider the distance from the center as reflecting nuances in family functioning. The further a family system's functioning is from the center, the more extreme

DIAGRAM 8.1

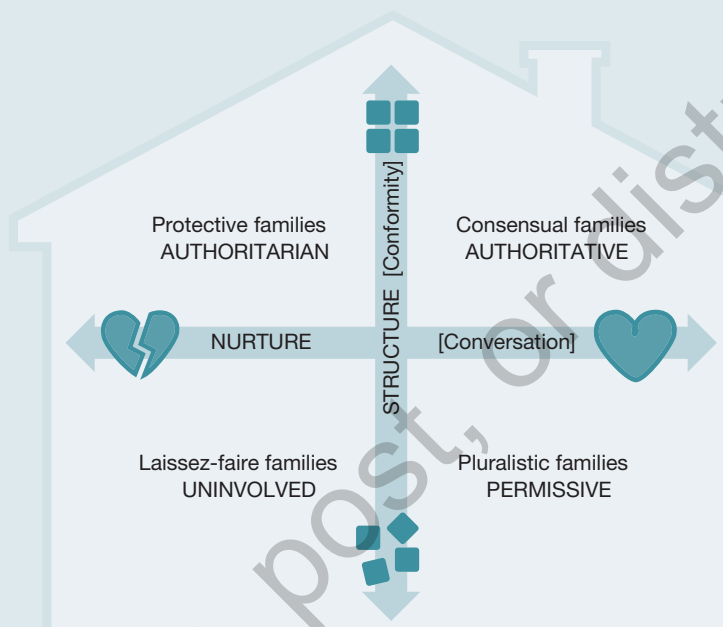
Note the interaction between the dimensions of “conversation” and “conformity” in family communication patterns.



Sources: Based on Galvin, Braithwaite, and Bylund (2014, p. 176) and Le Poire (2006).

DIAGRAM 8.2

Note the interaction between the dimensions of nurture (emotional expressiveness) and structure (control, order) in parenting styles. These are similar to the axes described in the family communication styles, where the horizontal axis relating to emotional expressiveness is labeled “conversation” and the vertical axis relating to the control and order in the relationship is represented by “conformity” in family communication patterns.



Source: Bigner and Gerhardt (2019, p. 47).

the systemic presentation of the behavioral patterns (Bigner & Gerhardt, 2019, p. 46).

Additionally, family systems are not static; rather, they are dynamic. For that reason, families may change their communication patterns and interactions depending on context. Also, the lifespan position of participants can influence the quality of interactions (Bigner & Gerhardt, 2019, p. 10).

Fitzpatrick (2004) describes the following four quadrants that result as these two axes of conversation and conformity intersect:

- *Protective*. High conformity and low engagement (in this interactional style difficult topics will be avoided).
- *Laissez-faire*. Low engagement combined with low conformity (in this interactional style conversation can be very permissive, with low censorship).
- *Pluralistic*. Low conformity and high conversational engagement (in this interactional style participants are motivated to engage, and they are open to diverse conversations, hence the word pluralistic, as many topics can be addressed).
- *Consensual*. High engagement combined with high conformity.

(Continued)

(Continued)

One can expect the greatest likelihood of conversation in consensual and the pluralistic families. These are the talkative ones, but they differ in that their motives for talking and conversation may not be the same. These families may enjoy talking with their children because they like communication, and it is a way of showing their affection; communication represents a form of emotional bonding. In these family types, relationship is paramount, and that, in turn, motivates the need for enthusiastic conversation.

One would expect to find less conversation in protective and laissez-faire families. In families that tend to be more protective of their children, communication might be limited because it is mainly about exerting control. In the laissez-faire type of family, control is low and family members are typically left to their own devices, so communication is not often necessary. There is no conscious or concerted effort to create moments of conversation.

Family communication takes place on two levels. On the one hand, it is *personal* in that we have an inner language and inner thoughts, which we may wish to share with others. On the other hand, communication has *interpersonal* components when it happens between people, in this case, between family members. Both these components play a role. For example, the individual may formulate ideas (personal) but may do so in response to the input of somebody else (interpersonal). So both interpersonal communication processes and the inner dialogue a person may have can be circular (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006, pp. 51–52).

The family communication patterns theory looks at family communication from the point of view of relational cognition as well as interpersonal behavior. As Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2006) state,

We consider the origin of family communication patterns theory as a model of how families create a shared social reality through the process of coorientation and the subsequent reformulation of the model as a theory of interpersonal behavior. (p. 51)

According to these authors, underlying cognitive processes will be revealed in the resulting

communication behaviors within families. This in turn will group them into four family types (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006, p. 51).

The concept that families share a social reality and that this social reality will influence how they communicate represents early elements of the theory based on the work of McLeod and Chaffee (McLeod, Atkin, & Chaffee, 1972; McLeod & Chaffee 1973) who came from the world of mass media. In the early seventies, cognitive psychology was pushing the boundaries of behaviorism and wanted to explore wider contexts and applications. Fitzpatrick (2011, pp. 167–179) was influenced by elements in various communication theories; also, her undergraduate major in political science, intercultural communication, and advertising all influenced aspects of her theory on family communication patterns.

Several research studies have looked at aspects of conversational styles within families, for instance, the work by Rueter and Koerner (2008) who study community and family patterns that affect adjustment. In this particular study, they looked at children who had joined the family through adoption. They found that a conversation orientation within the families—one that was neither too demanding of conformity nor exclusively focused on conversation—seemed to have the best outcomes in terms of parenting. This type of approach could be compared to authoritative parenting where communication is available yet appropriately structured.

Overlap with models of family functioning. The family communication patterns theory has some commonalities with the Olson circumplex model, as well as with the parenting circumplex model. In the latter, nurture and structure act as the horizontal and vertical axes, respectively, to illustrate various parenting dimensions (Bigner & Gerhardt, 2019, pp. 46–47). In the family communication patterns theory, structure as a parenting dimension is represented by the concept of conformity, and nurture as a parenting dimension is represented by the concept of conversation. This is fairly intuitive. The resulting communication styles have some similarities with parenting styles. One could deduct that laissez-faire parents are also likely to adopt laissez-faire communication styles.

In a Nutshell

Family Communication Patterns Theory

- Communication has both cognitive (personal) and interpersonal dimensions.
- In communications, an interaction occurs between two dimensions, namely, conversation and conformity.
- Based on these two dimensions of conversation and conformity, a model of family communication patterns is created.
- The four family communication patterns are consensual, protective, laissez-faire, and protective.
- One can expect the greatest likelihood of conversation in consensual and pluralistic families.
- One can expect to find less conversation in protective and laissez-faire families.
- The family communication patterns theory has some commonalities with the Olson circumplex model, as well as with the parenting circumplex model.
- Interpersonal communication processes are circular, as is a person's inner dialogue.

CHAPTER FOCUS POINTS

Families in a Digital World

- Postmillennial children and adolescents are very familiar with the web for entertainment and communication. If a website provides social interaction, it serves as a social media site; numerous such sites are currently available.
- True concern is appropriate if electronic communications replace face-to-face communications, precipitate self-image anxieties, or involve online bullying. Cyber trolling, which aims vicious and destructive remarks at victims, is also problematic.

The Dynamics of a Digital World

- The world of digital media offers great advantages; computers have irrevocably changed our society and our communications. We may be limited by our inability to juggle multiple communication channels simultaneously.
- Cell phones put us on mental standby, diverting our attention. Our attention span is affected by constant interruptions.
- Parents set the tone for what is happening in the home. Digital and social media and related communication patterns have the ability to influence family dynamics.

Family Rituals in a Digital World

- The thoughtful and controlled use of screen time can be enriching in select circumstances. Some online communication offers clear educational advantages.
- The flipside is that very young children (those under the age of three) should not be exposed to unsupervised and extended screen time, including television time.
- Early childhood is a period of very rapid and sensitive brain development for the young; so the nature and content of a child's stimulation must be considered, and children should be protected from indiscriminate exposure to web-based and digital material.

Family Communication Networks

- We can anticipate that culture influences the type and nature of our conversations. As younger generations are exposed to digital and other social media, some of the attention has shifted away from the family unit.
- Millennials are becoming increasingly self-focused and peer-referenced. How we communicate is influenced by a number of interacting factors, including how other people react to what we say and how we say it.

- Communication patterns are also modeled and influenced by the examples of significant persons in our lives; hence, families and close peer groups may imitate aspects of each other's interactions and communications.

Spotlight on Theories:
Family Communication Patterns Theory

- Communication has both cognitive (personal) and interpersonal dimensions.
- In communication, an interaction occurs between two dimensions, namely, conversation and conformity.
- Based on these two dimensions of conversation and conformity, a model of family communication patterns is created.
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- The family communication patterns theory has some commonalities with the Olson circumplex model, as well as with the parenting circumplex model.
- Interpersonal communication processes are circular, as is a person's inner dialogue.

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