

1-1-2018

Invited Essay: Investigating Family Voices from the Margins

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Communication**

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Journal of Family Communication, Vol. 18, No. 2 (2018): 85-91. [DOI](#). This article is © Taylor and Francis (Routledge) and permission has been granted for this version to appear in [e-Publications@Marquette](#). Taylor and Francis (Routledge) does not grant permission for this article to be further copied/distributed or hosted elsewhere without the express permission from Taylor and Francis (Routledge).

Contents

Abstract.....	2
Current research in the <i>journal of family communication</i>	3
Types of diversity	4
Ethnic-racial and global diversity	4
Economic diversity.....	5
Diversity in social class.....	5
Diversity in family type	6
Conclusion.....	7
References	7

Invited Essay: Investigating Family Voices from the Margins

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Abstract

This essay surveys articles from the *Journal of Family Communication* to make the argument that our journal needs to feature more scholarship on families that heretofore have been virtually ignored or marginalized. We discuss four types of diversity to consider when exploring questions of family communication, and review three imperatives for making this argument.

Few can argue with the assertion that we live in times of increasing diversity. Given the shrinking of the globe through travel and electronic communication, people are often in contact with those who differ from themselves in myriad ways. Along with this contact comes increasing discussion and acknowledgment of diversity and difference. These conversations are, for the most part, quite difficult and challenging as people struggle to understand those who differ from themselves in significant and powerful ways (Parker, [2017](#)). After all, discussions centering on issues related to race, class, sexual identity, refugee status, spirituality/religion, among a number of other cultural variables, are laden with opinion, misinformation, deception, and passion. Furthermore, difficulty ensues when trying to define precisely what is meant when scholars, the public, and policy makers speak about diversity or neglected populations. Still, it is incumbent upon those of us in the academy, who occupy extremely privileged standpoints, to infuse these dialogues with advocacy, clarity, and research that can and will “make a difference” (García-Jiménez & Craig, , p. 430) in the lives of the world’s marginalized families. Over the years, family communication scholarship has attempted to answer this charge. This has been especially true for the *Journal of Family Communication (JFC)*. Since its inception (Gudykunst & Lee, [2001](#); Socha,), *JFC* has advocated for providing voice to those families who previously had been silent, either because their stories had been overlooked or because some in high power positions sought to marginalize them. More recent conversations (e.g., Soliz & Phillips, [2018](#)) continue to articulate this position. We argue that this is an important stance to defend. When we interviewed lesbian mothers and gay fathers about how they talked to their children about their sexual/affectional orientation (West & Turner, [1995](#)), one mother made the comment that she appreciated our attention and looked forward to her perspective being represented in a book chapter. She noted that having her words appear on the printed page accorded her, and her family, legitimacy. That article was written over two decades ago and today, we continue to believe that this value should ring true for all marginalized people. Elsewhere we have argued (Turner & West, [in press](#)) that increasing visibility in the media for gay and lesbian people is undoubtedly a positive thing. We cite two studies demonstrating that when young people see more televisual depictions of LGBTQ characters, they are more likely to support gay rights and believe in equality between LGBTQ people and heterosexual people (Bond & Compton, [2015](#);

Garretson,). This research represents what Timmerman (2010) advocated when he noted that communication scholarship must work toward “making a difference” and begs a larger question related to marginalized families: “What kind of difference do we want to make?” (García-Jiménez & Craig, 2010, p. 429).

One answer to Timmerman’s (2010) question focuses on a two-part effort: first to acknowledge and listen to multiple populations, and second to take action and apply research findings that will improve families’ lives based on their own directives. Since the beginning of the 21st century, in particular, a number of scholars have responded to unanswered questions related to historically ignored or devalued populations. Our own efforts in this regard, for instance, focused primarily on the first part of the process described above: opening our scholarship to diverse voices. In 2003 we co-edited a special issue of *JFC* related to diversity that we called: “*Communication and Diversity in the Contemporary Family*” (Turner & West, 2003). In that collection, we took an expansive approach to diversity and were pleased to publish communication scholarship that ranged from post-divorce families, to transracial adoption, to ethnicity and family storytelling.

Several years later we continued our quest to highlight quality scholarship related to families and diversity in *JFC*, this time training our attention specifically on national culture: “*Sustaining the Dialogue: National Culture and Communication*” (Turner & West, 2011). At the time, we embraced family communication scholarship that spanned various cultural communities, including father–daughter relationships in Druze society and communication in the Japanese–American household. In the 2011 special issue, we concluded by noting that “most family communication researchers support the importance of investigating the intersection among family interactions and background. However, the actual undertaking of such research is laden with challenges and, consequently, is scarce in the literature” (p. 67). For instance, many scholars in the United States, of necessity, rely on convenience samples of their students. This practice skews the ethnic, racial composition of these samples given that in the United States the majority of college undergraduates are white. In the Fall of 2015, there were 17 million U.S. undergraduates. Their ethnic/racial numbers were as follows: 9.3 million white; 3.0 million Latinx; 2.3 million African American; 1.1 million Asian/Pacific Islander; and 132,000 American Indian/Alaska Native (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

Current research in the *journal of family communication*

Despite the challenges we discussed in 2011, and those that continue eight years later, we are heartened by the research that has been published in *JFC* featuring underrepresented populations and approaching topics that previously had been neglected. In the research published in the *Journal* we see indications that scholars are expanding their definitions of “family” and enlarging the pool of populations that are sampled. For instance, recently several articles have appeared in *JFC* examining communication behaviors in families formed through adoption, the foster system, and donor-assistance (e.g., Marko Harrigan, Priore, Wagner, & Palka, 2017; Miller-Ott, 2017; Nelson & Colaner, 2018). Additionally, one article (Khawaja, Hebbani, Obijiofor, & Gallois, 2017) explored parent–child communication practices in refugee families, while another focused on families who have immigrated to Israel (Khvorostianov, 2016). Another article examined parent–teen conflict in Latinx families (Merolla & Kam, 2018) and one article investigated Korean American parent–child relationships (Kim, Lee, & Lee, 2015). The topic of family estrangement was interrogated in two articles (Carr, Holman, Abetz, Koenig Kellas, & Vagnoni, 2015; Scharp & Thomas, 2016), troubling our long-held belief that families differ from other relationships because they are life-long.

All of these lines of research are promising, and begin to diversify our sense of what constitutes family. However, we believe that a great many more efforts can, and should, be undertaken. Let's consider one avenue underscoring our belief. In early 2018, we scanned the 82 articles published in *JFC* and *JFC* online since 2015, finding several populations who are featured in our journal, and many other populations who are not nearly as well represented. A great deal of the research—while rigorous and engaging—continues the trend toward investigating issues and populations that we might call “privileging the privileged,” given the predominance of European American, heterosexual, middle-class participants represented in the journal. Of the 82 articles published in *JFC* from 2015–2017, eight were conceptual pieces and contained no data; a surprising number—16—did not report any ethnic-racial, or national demographics for the respondents. In a few cases this was explained (when speaking to adopted adults the topic of ethnic origin was deemed too sensitive to ask about, for instance), but for the most part, it went unremarked upon. Of the remaining 58 articles, 49 of them, or almost 85% had predominately white participants, ranging from 61% to 100% of the sample. The vast majority of the samples were drawn from middle-class, well-educated populations. Only nine of the 58 articles featured participants from outside the United States and three of those included both U.S. and international participants. Some articles examined co-cultures within the United States, such as Latinx teens in the Southwestern United States (Merolla & Kam, [2018](#)).

Types of diversity

Of course, as we have acknowledged, it is not easy to access diverse populations for our studies. But in addition, another difficulty lies in the very definition of *diversity*, and what we mean when we talk about populations whose voices are not attended to in our mainstream research. There are many approaches to thinking about diversity, and the term may be defined variously. We discuss four approaches below.

Ethnic-racial and global diversity

For instance, we might be advocating for studies that include (or focus on) communication in families representing a variety of *ethnic-racial and global* groups as Soliz and Phillips ([2018](#)) so cogently advanced recently. This would seem to be critical to our knowledge of family communication writ large as opposed to U.S. families' communication. All of our introductory texts, for example, observe how significant the language a person speaks is to the meaning making process (e.g., Verderber, Sellnow, & Verderber, [2017](#)). Given this insight, speakers of different languages would undoubtedly process family events differently.

In a 2012 Ted talk, Keith Chen argued that when languages distinguish among the past, present, and future grammatically (e.g., it rained yesterday, it's raining today, it will rain tomorrow) the way English does, the speakers of those languages will be affected in myriad ways. Chen advances that this grammatical aspect of language may affect its speakers in terms of their abilities to save money for the future or take measures to safeguard their health such as not smoking or drinking to excess. Chen hypothesized that people, like the Chinese, whose language does not make these grammatical distinctions will behave differently in terms of saving money, smoking, and drinking, for instance. And, in fact, Chen discovered in his research, that Chinese speakers save a lot more than English speakers, and so do people in other countries, like Sweden, whose language doesn't make grammatical distinctions among past, present, and future (Chen, [2012](#)). If language makes such a difference, what are we failing to learn about family communication if we only study families who speak the same native language?

One study published in *JFC* (Kim et al., [2015](#)), illustrates this approach by examining how bilingual language use in Korean American parent-child interactions negotiated traditional Korean expectations with U.S. expectations. The authors did in-depth work with three Korean American mothers and their

children and concluded that the dyads used language strategically to create a sense of what it means to be a parent and a child at the intersection of Korean and U.S. cultures. The authors observe that their findings contribute to the small but growing literature of how immigrant families navigate between their home culture and the social culture in which they currently reside.

Economic diversity

It's equally possible to conceptualize diversity by examining a range of *economic* backgrounds. As we write this, the U.S. stock market is reaching new heights, and generally the world economy is thriving. In the third quarter of 2017, the rate of home ownership in the United States was 64% according to the government census (Quarterly residential vacancies and home ownership, [2017](#)). Companies are reaping profits never before attained. Unemployment is at a historic low. These are, by most measures, signs of an economy on the move.

Yet, we wonder: Who has been left out of this economic growth? We know that almost 80% of U.S. families are struggling to simply make it from one paycheck to the next (Career Builder, [2017](#)). Drawing on data from The World Bank, which sets the International Poverty Line, Roser and Ortiz-Ospina ([2017](#)) state that in 2013, 746 million people across the globe lived in extreme poverty. Despite growing consumer confidence in the United States, over 40 million people are living in poverty. Homelessness is on the rise, with an upward trend of families and young children living on the streets (Wagner, [2018](#)). This trend shows no signs of abating. With this sort of backdrop, it seems opportunistic to investigate the communication patterns and behaviors in families that may be left behind despite the "rosy" economic news. To what extent have their communication practices been impacted by the economy? How has communication been influenced when family members need to hold down multiple jobs just to pay monthly expenses? What effect does corporate downsizing (e.g., layoffs and firings) have upon family life? These and a host of other communi-economic issues should be prominent on the scholarly horizon of family communication researchers.

Studies examining communication in poor, homeless, or other economically disadvantaged families are few and far between in *JFC*. One exception to this is a study by Lucas and Buzzanell ([2012](#)), who focus on communicating resilience among working class families where the main wage earners lost their mining job during the recession of the 1980s in the United States. The authors noted that participants' discourse "reflected a nose-to-the grindstone mentality" (p. 197). They also observed that family values about money and work were communicated during this time to develop resiliency among family members. The authors do not comment directly on the fact that theirs is one of very few studies to appear in *JFC* that is set in a working class community and deals with financial hardship. They do note their findings may be specific to this group, and that is one reason why we are advocating that more studies examining families of lower economic status and/or suffering from economic hard times should be undertaken.

Diversity in social class

Relatedly, diversity may also be viewed as encompassing a wide variety of people representing different *social classes*. For instance, family members' educational level, income, and occupational opportunities all remain vital to understanding the marginalized family. Economic trends show that the working and middle classes in the United States are slowly disappearing. Yet, our scholarship rarely acknowledges this quandary for families. This seems to be a critical void since some research indicates that social class inequalities have more of an effect on children than do parenting practices (Sullivan, Ketende, & Joshi,

[2013](#)). These elements and regrettable trends related to social standing, or class, could certainly be expected to influence family communication behaviors. Consequently, thoughtful and critical analyses should be undertaken that might help shed light on how various communication practices are impacted by social class.

If we accept that college education is a marker of class (Draut, [2016](#); Williams, [2016](#)), a good example of a line of research that does focus on participants from other than the U.S. middle class consists of examinations of first generation college students (e.g., Wang, [2014](#); Wang & Nuru, [2017](#)). Tiffany Wang and her colleague's work illuminates how class influences family communication practices related to a specific family milestone: a child leaving home for college. There is a fairly robust literature, mainly in fields outside of communication, examining the transition to college (e.g., Smith, Carmack, & Titsworth, [2006](#); Yogan, Freedle, & Ringenberg, [2017](#)), but the questions and findings in this literature elide the insights obtained from interviews with first-generation college students. Work examining a middle-class sample (Smith et al., [2006](#)) found that students' comments about leaving home for college could be understood through the dialectic tension between independence and interdependence. Wang and Nuru ([2017](#)) found their participants articulated themes of financial concern, their aspirations for more than their parents had achieved, and feelings of guilt at leaving the family behind. While both sets of findings are valid and contribute to our knowledge of family communication during the transition to college, stopping only with the studies on middle-class students leaves out the layered findings contributed by examining the concerns of first-generation students.

Diversity in family type

Family types illustrate one variable that we have done a better job of representing in the journal (e.g., stepfamilies, donor-assisted families, adoptive, and foster families), although the literature on donor-assisted and foster families is still only recently emerging. However, there are many types of families who do not make it on to the pages of our journal. Although gay- and lesbian-led families have increased in visibility, and they have been written about elsewhere (e.g., Suter, [2015](#)), only one article presented research from this family type in the 82 *JFC* articles from 2015 to 2018 that we examined (Suter, Koenig Kellas, Webb, & Allen, [2016](#)). The article by Elizabeth Suter and her colleagues is an important one because it addresses how lesbian mothers construct their family of origin stories. As the authors point out, family stories shape family life in crucial ways, and the story of how a family came to be is usually couched within a heterosexual master narrative. Thus, lesbian mothers have to do narrative labor to shape a narrative to fit their families. The article illustrates how lesbian mothers situate their family of origin stories within the construct of "normality".

It's a worthwhile project to examine how lesbian and gay families tell stories and use communication to establish a sense of family-ness. Yet, communication scholars have not yet deployed their research energies in the direction of lesbian and gay families. Suter ([2015](#)) concludes her review of the literature focused on this family type by noting that "the communication discipline is rather late to the study of gay and lesbian parenting" (p. 242), and most of what we know about this family type comes primarily from allied fields such as psychology and family studies.

In addition to lesbian and gay families, communication scholars could profitably examine transgender families, as well as other sexual minorities. To date, *JFC* has only published one article focused on how families communicatively cope with transgender identity (Norwood, [2012](#)). This seems to be a lacuna in the literature, especially because as Norwood argued in 2012, sex and gender are discursively constructed, and these constructions are critically important to family relationships.

Conclusion

As family communication researchers, we are in a unique and privileged position to respond to questions about what diversity means and to explore the unique communication practices of families from a variety of backgrounds and circumstances. In 2003 (Turner & West) we stated that there are three imperatives guiding our insistence on diversity in our research: (1) an ethical imperative, (2) a demographic imperative, and (3) a theoretical imperative. First, we argued that listening to all families is the right thing to do, and marginalizing some families based on any criteria is unethical. Secondly, we observed that evolving demographics require us to include the range of families existing across the globe if we are to understand family communication fully. And finally, we asserted that it is not possible to validate our theories of family communication if we only study a narrow range of families. We firmly believe that these same imperatives exist today, and have only increased in urgency and importance.

As family communication scholars, we should make it a primary goal to unpack the various communication-centered issues that could assist us in understanding how families from a wide variety of backgrounds and in a wide variety of configurations interact. In particular, those “families on the margins” are often chronically stressed as they navigate the myriad demands of a global environment that is even more inhospitable to “difference” than ever. Our research may result in shedding new light and providing important resources to these individuals who have minimal, if any, access to power. We are keenly aware that many *JFC* readers and scholars have already begun this type of research, and we hope that our comments along with those of our colleagues (e.g., Gudykunst & Lee, [2001](#); Socha, [2001](#); Soliz & Phillips, [2018](#)) encourage more research in this direction. Toward that end, we are happy to announce that we will be guest-editing another issue of *JFC* focusing on studies examining the communication practices of families on the margins. The issue will appear in 2019, and we will be circulating a call for submissions in the near future. We hope you will respond to the call and soon homeless, refugee, working-class and other families now on the margins of both society and our research agendas will move to the center. And, we will become ever more mindful of the wide variety of families existing in contemporary society whose voices need to be heard.

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