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# Introduction to the Special Issue: Increasing Space for Families on the Margins

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*Until the lions have a voice, the glory of the hunt will always be the tale of the hunter.*

–Nigerian proverb

Previously, I have argued, with Rich West, that we live in times of increasing diversity, which impact the composition and definition of “family” in myriad ways (Turner & West, 2018). The Council on Contemporary Families, for instance, reported in 2017 that the proportion of unmarried adults in the United States (U.S.) has reached an all-time high of 110.6 million people, or more than 45 percent of all those in the country aged 18 or older. Of those unmarried adults, 63.5 percent have never married. The report goes on to assert that these individuals play important roles in families. First, many unmarried people have children (more than 35 percent of women giving birth each year are unmarried; more than a third of custodial grandparents are unmarried), and second those without children often play instrumental roles in families as aunts, uncles, or teachers (Council on Contemporary Families, 2017).

Further, as the Pew Research Center noted in a 2015 report, (Pew Research Center, 2015) fewer than half of the children in the United States live in households with their biological parents who are in their first marriage. The Pew Research Report concludes that “there is no longer one dominant family form in the U.S. Parents today are raising their children against a backdrop of increasingly diverse and, for many, constantly evolving family forms” (para 2). By contrast, the report notes that in 1960 in the United States 73% of all children lived in families consisting of themselves and two married parents in their first marriage. Although, it could be argued that this dominant family form still left many families on the margins, it is the case that it might have been easier to overlook diversity in 1960. Today that is no longer the case, and no one can deny that the ubiquity of electronic communication and affordable travel means that people now often come into contact with those who differ from themselves and who have families that are different from their own.

Fetters (2019) opined on the diversity shown by the candidates running for the Democratic nomination for president in 2020, as well as the current Republican president, stating:

Of the 24 candidates, eight have blended families: Donald Trump has children with multiple partners; the candidates Elizabeth Warren, John Hickenlooper, Bill Weld, and Joe Biden are married and have children from previous marriages, while Bernie Sanders is married and has a son from a previous relationship; Sanders, Tim Ryan, and Kamala Harris all have stepchildren. Seven are remarried divorcés or divorcées (Trump, Warren, Hickenlooper, Weld, Sanders, Eric Swalwell, and Tulsi Gabbard), and four have no children of their own (Harris, Gabbard, Pete Buttigieg, and Cory Booker). One has a spouse of the same sex (Buttigieg), one is a remarried widower (Biden), and two are unmarried (Booker and the self-help and spirituality author Marianne Williamson). Two candidates have at some point lived as single mothers (Warren and Williamson). (para 5)

Fetters (2019) notes that this means that, taken as a whole, the candidates’ families look a lot like the mosaic of families across the U.S. Additionally, she points out that presidents in the past did not always have families resembling the 1960s dominant form. She states that, historically, blended families were very common due to early deaths of parents, and observes that George Washington was the stepfather to Martha Washington’s children from her first marriage. If, as Fetters argues, the First Family is aspirational as well as emblematic for people in the United States, we may be seeing a step away from the mold of the “traditional” family that began in the 1950s, and an opening for more diversity in how we view families.

In editing this special issue, I’m acting on the belief that family communication scholarship has an ethical responsibility to respond to the increasing visibility of family diversity. In an early study I did with Rich West (West & Turner, 1995), I learned the value of giving voice, through research, to marginalized family types. This study examined how lesbian mothers and gay fathers disclosed their sexual/affectional identity to their children. After the interview, one of the participants commented to me that she appreciated being interviewed for our piece, and she asked me where it was going to appear in print. Upon learning that it was to be a chapter in an edited book, she commented that she was grateful that I had interviewed her and that being in a book legitimated her family and lesbian families in general. I present this special issue in exactly that spirit. All families deserve to have their voices heard and to see their family type discussed in print.

Of course, as I have acknowledged elsewhere (Turner & West, 2011, 2018), it is not always easy to access diverse populations for our studies. For example, when researchers use undergraduate students as their respondents they are often utilizing mainly white participants. In fall, 2015, almost 60 percent of U.S. undergraduates were white and the remainder were split among the following ethnicities: Latinx, African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Alaska Native. None of groups after the white majority totaled even half as many undergraduates as the white students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

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. Furthermore, we must acknowledge the many ways we might approach the concept of diversity, which, in and of itself, presents some challenges. In 2018, Rich West and I explored some of the ways that diversity might be framed (e.g., as a function of ethnic, racial, or global differences, economic disparities, differences in social class, or differences in family types), noting that trying to define precisely what is meant when scholars, the public, and policy makers speak about diversity or neglected populations also creates a challenge for this type of research.

Still, despite these and other challenges, it is incumbent upon those of us who do research on family communication to work for inclusion and accurate representation. In accessing diverse families for our research we hope to “make a difference” (Garcia-Jimenez & Craig, 2010, p. 429) in the lives of the world’s marginalized families. I believe simply seeing themselves reflected in print and as part of the scholarly conversation is liberating for people, as my respondent told me over 20 years ago. But we can go further and move toward engaged research that will actually affect change and improve the lives of families (Carragee & Frey, 2016).

The *Journal of Family Communication (JFC)* is an ideal vehicle for providing voice to previously marginalized families (Gudykunst & Lee, 2001; Socha, 2001; Soliz & Phillips, 2017). I have been pleased and honored to be part of *JFC*’s efforts to expand the space for marginalized voices. This is the third special issue for *JFC* focusing on diversity that I have worked on. The first special issue was called “*Communication and Diversity in the Contemporary Family*” (Turner & West, 2003). At that time we approached diversity mainly from an ethnic and demographic standpoint and the articles published in that collection ranged from communication in post-divorce families, to communication in families experiencing transracial adoption, to how ethnicity impacts family storytelling behaviors.

In 2011, Rich West and I edited another special issue for *JFC* focusing on national culture. We called that issue “*Sustaining the Dialogue: National Culture and Communication*” (Turner & West, 2011). We were interested in highlighting scholarship that examined how national culture interfaced with families and the communication within them. As a result we published research ranging from studies set in Japanese-American families to father-daughter relationships in the Druze culture.

Since its inception, *JFC* has been an important vehicle for featuring underrepresented populations and grappling with neglected topics in family communication. In 2018, in discussing the approach to this special issue, West and I noted some specific articles that have appeared in *JFC* from 2015–2018 that expand the definition of family (Turner & West, 2018). We examined each of the 82 articles published in the journal during this time period and we found some articles that approached diversity as a

function of family type and examined communication behaviors in families formed through adoption, the foster system, and donor-assistance (Harrigan, Priore, Wagner, & Palka, 2017; Miller-Ott, 2017; Nelson & Colaner, 2017). Only one study focused on the gay and lesbian family type (Suter, Kellas, Webb, & Allen, 2016), and in the whole history of *JFC*, only a single study examined communication in families with a transgender member (Norwood, 2012).

We also noted articles approaching diversity as a function of ethnicity, racial, or global differences. One such study explored parent-child communication practices in refugee families (Khawaja, Hebbani, Obijiofor, & Gallois, 2017), and another examined families who have immigrated to Israel (Khvorostianov, 2016). There was one article using Latinx family members as participants (Merolla & Kam, 2018) as well as one focused on Korean American families (Kim, Lee, & Lee, 2015). The Kim, Lee, and Lee piece was notable because it examined how bilingual language use in Korean American parent-child interactions negotiated traditional Korean expectations with U.S. expectations.

To find an example of diversity as a function of both economic difference and social class, we had to go beyond our time frame to 2012. This article examined communicating resilience among working class families in the U.S. where the main wage earners lost their mining jobs during the recession of the 1980s (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012). One article approached social class by exploring communication in families with a first generation college student member (Wang & Nuru, 2017).

Additionally, two articles tackled the topic of family estrangement (Carr, Holman, Abetz, Koenig Kellas, & Vagnoni, 2015; Scharp & Thomas, 2016). This topic is an interesting avenue for research because it calls into question one of the main defining characteristics of family – that family relationships are life-long. Interrogating this long-held belief certainly allows us to open space for families that do not adhere to this criterion.

In the short time since we wrote the piece examining how *JFC* has showcased diversity in the recent past (Turner & West, 2018), I have found some additional articles featuring diverse families that have been published in the journal. A few examine diversity through the lens of family type; one focuses on communication in stepfamilies (Braithwaite et al., 2018), another on families formed through adoption, specifically when the adoption is an open one (Horstman, Colaner, Nelson, Bish, & Hays, 2018). A third article in this category focuses on a neglected family relationship: in-laws (Mikucki-Enyart, 2018). One article examines communication in migrant families, thus approaching diversity through an ethnic, racial, global lens (Li, 2018). Another article using that same lens on diversity is a cross-cultural examination of communication around health history in families from the following ethnicities: Pacific Islander, Latinx, and European American (Canary et al., 2019). Finally, Scharp and Hall (2019) encourage us to reconsider the definition of family that focuses on closeness among the members, which troubles the way we have often thought about families and how they should be defined.

The goal of this special issue was to train our research energy even more specifically on the topic of diversity, and extend the efforts that I have spotlighted above.

## Preview of the research presented in this special issue

The first article in this issue is an invited piece written by Sumana Chattopadhyay. The article focuses on refugee families, a topic that has received scant attention in family communication scholarship, although a great deal of attention in the popular press. Chattopadhyay conducted a textual analysis of 35 stories that appeared in *The New York Times* about the migration of Central American families. Her analysis surfaces four categories of content with some sub-categories. Chattopadhyay shows that the migrant of the past was most often a single man whereas now migrants are more likely to be families fleeing gang violence in their home country. The article illustrates how government policy intersects with family behavior and how communication *about* families, such as the media provide, potentially makes a difference to policy and thus to families' practices as well. This research trains our attention on a neglected population but one that is growing in numbers if not in influence.

Erin Brummett and Tamara Afifi examine ethnic diversity in the second article in this issue. They investigate how family members support (or fail to support) those in the family who are involved in interracial romantic relationships. The authors are interested in how people involved in interracial romantic relationships seek support from their family members, and what happens when they receive it or fail to do so. As the authors argue, interracial relationships are relatively common in lived experience but underrepresented in our scholarship. Brummett and Afifi generate a grounded theory explaining people's expectations for support, their means of seeking support, and how the violations of their expectations result in strain.

The third article, "'We're just family, you know': Exploring the discourses of family in gay parents' relational talk" by Benjamin Baker, focuses on how gay, married fathers discursively create and sustain family identity. The study is framed by relational dialectics theory (Baxter, 2011), and Baker finds that there's a tension revealed in gay fathers' discourse featuring the competing discourses of traditional and nontraditional family structures. As Baker argues, it is important to continue examining same-sex families as this family form is ever evolving. Further, we have neglected investigations of the identity work that gay fathers do to establish a sense of "family-ness" in their own families. Baker's work is an opening to our understanding in this area.

The fourth article in this special issue focuses on ethnic diversity through an examination of language brokering, or how parents without strong English skills utilize their bilingual children as translators. This article by Lisa Guntzviller and Ningxin Wang, entitled "Mother-adolescent communication in low-income, Latino families during language brokering: Examining the theory of resilience and relational load," tested the theory of resilience and relational load (TRRL) in low-income, Latino mother-adolescent dyads who engaged in language brokering. This is a new context for the theory's application and also allows us to see how language and bilingual skills interact with overall communication behaviors in these families.

The fifth article, "The incarcerated parent: Examining mother-child conflict at the margins through a bio-ecological lens," by David Atkin and his colleagues examines conflict, parenting communication style and attitudes regarding the parent-child relationship for a marginalized population: incarcerated mothers and their children. The authors found that when conflict between incarcerated mothers and their children ended positively the mothers had used an authoritative parenting communication style.

And when they engaged in conflict with their children that ended negatively they used an authoritarian style. In addition to this population being a neglected one in our scholarship, and a marginalized one in society, the value of studying them is clear when the authors suggest that productive parenting communication styles can help support efforts to reduce recidivism.

In the sixth article, “‘A second chance at being a parent’: Grandparent caregivers’ reported communication and parenting practices with co-residential grandchildren,” Jessica Freeman and her coauthors study the communication in grandfamilies, or family structures in which grandparent(s) co-reside with and assume the primary caregiving role for at least one grandchild. Although this family type is increasingly common in the United States (an estimated 2.7 million grandparents are custodial caregivers for at least one of their grandchildren), very little communication research addresses them. The authors use family communication patterns theory in a unique way to create a hybrid analysis of these grandparents’ beliefs and communication practices. They discover that grandparents believe they utilize open communication with their grandchildren allowing for a discussion of emotion and encouraging questions and dialogue. Further, the custodial grandparents thought they were doing a better job of parenting the “second time around.” Their work represents a first foray into examining grandfamilies from a communication perspective.

The seventh, and final, article, “No matter what: A qualitative analysis of how LGBTQ families and allies define family through an interactive art project,” by Karina Willes and her colleagues seeks to investigate whether family type (i.e. LGBTQ families) makes a difference in how people define family for themselves. The authors find that participants stressed unconditional love, support, and acceptance in their definitions. Of particular interest in this article is the unique method used by the authors. In addition to having participants write their definitions for family, they were also asked to create a visual representation of their own family. Additionally, the data were solicited at a Pride festival during an interactive art display that arguably allowed the authors to collect “natural” data, or at least data relatively unaffected by researcher intervention.

## Conclusion

I am delighted to present this special issue offering research spanning six diverse populations. All of these populations are those that our scholarship has either neglected completely or only briefly addressed in the past. In 2018, West and I noted, that “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” (p. 88), and I hope that this special issue exemplifies the sentiment behind this statement. As we continue to make space in our scholarship for those families whose communication practices have been previously marginalized, we should be able both to understand family communication more completely, and to move these families away from the margins and toward a central position in our research and in our activism.

I was excited and gratified by the response to the call for this special issue, and I believe there could have been several special journal issues produced on this topic. But, hopefully in the future we will not need to focus on this scholarship in a special issue. Going forward I expect to see an even wider variety of diversity represented in every issue of the *Journal of Family Communication*. And I am heartened by

the strong work that my colleagues continue to do investigating the interactions of families from myriad backgrounds and diverse types. I am confident that our continuing scholarship heralds an opening that allows all families to be recognized as worthy of study, bringing those on the margins to the center, providing a voice to those who have not yet spoken, and enriching our knowledge base.

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