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Essay Review of Family Communication

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BOOK REVIEWS

Family Communication

Chris Segrin & Jean Flora (2005). Lawrence Erlbaum. 496 pp.

**reviewed by Kristen Eis Cvancara
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In the past six months I have been working on a proposal for an undergraduate family communication course, a course new to the curriculum in the department I have recently joined. While in the process of reviewing of family communication texts, I received the request to review Segrin and Flora's new book, *Family Communication*.

Since I am seeking a text appropriate for an introductory undergraduate course, I do not recommend *Family Communication* for the students I envision in my classroom. However, I do strongly recommend it for more advanced purposes. The book is best described as a dense compilation of research findings. The combination of up-to-date research, insightful applications, and skilled writing within one binding makes the book an informative, as well as interesting, read to those familiar with the methods and theories used to study families. With this in mind, a professor could use this book as a detailed accompaniment to other texts that have a broader appeal to less-advanced

undergraduate students. Or, if a professor is seeking an advanced text that reviews interdisciplinary research on families with a focus on communication, this book is an excellent choice for a graduate or upper-level undergraduate course.

Similar to other texts on the subject, the content is divided into four major units. In Unit I, the first chapter defines "family" with a broad approach that includes the diversity found in current family structures, and frames family *functioning* according to Olson's circumplex model. In the second chapter, Segrin and Flora present various *theories* (e.g., systems, symbolic interaction, social learning, attachment, dialectical theory) to illustrate how family interactions are often explained and understood. *Interaction patterns* involving social norms and networks, routines and rituals, and stories and secrets are discussed in the third chapter. The section on family secrets was especially novel to the extant literature, and the most unique addition to this topic. The fourth chapter of this unit examines *interaction processes*, such as power, decision-making, conflict and intimacy.

Unit II reviews subsystems relevant to families. This unit begins with a chapter on *courtship and mate selection*, a topic relevant to how families communicate that is not always presented simultaneously with a discussion of communication theory and interaction patterns. Other relationship subsystems reviewed in subsequent chapters include *marriage and intimacy*, *parent-child*, and *sibling* interactions. Even though this unit incorporated a large degree of interdisciplinary research, the authors skillfully related the crucial role of communication within these family subsystems.

Unit III focuses on stress, and begins with a chapter that reviews *models of family stress and coping*. The ABC-X model and the circumplex model of family functioning are overlapped to illustrate how families manage stress. Within this framework, the authors discuss research that increases coping within the family context via communication. In the next chapter, the role of past, current, and future communication phenomena are evaluated regarding both

normative and non-normative stressors. In the remaining chapters, *divorce, remarriage, and stepfamilies* are specifically reviewed with existing communication research regarding how individuals in the family negotiate conflicts, change roles, and manage unique definitions of personal family experiences.

Unit IV reviews family interaction, health, and wellbeing. The first chapter focuses on *mental health* ailments (e.g., depression, loneliness, schizophrenia, eating disorders, alcoholism) associated with abnormal and problematic family interactions. The second chapter examines the more recently observed connection between family communication patterns and poor *physical health*. In the third chapter, on family *violence and abuse*, the authors discuss the inherent role communication plays in the acts of aggression experienced within familial relationships. And, the final chapter addresses programs and strategies for improving family communication and relationships. Unit IV highlights the detrimental consequences of the use of antisocial communication among family members. More information could have been added in this unit to review the potential positives associated with prosocial communication and current research in this area.

While the authors include a thoughtful appendix that describes a variety of research methodologies, it would be helpful to see more discussion of advanced research concerns associated with “level of analysis” and “unit of analysis.” These aspects of research design potentially confound and confuse study results regarding family interactions and relationships. Discussing these issues with more depth could offer students a better understanding of the obstacles related to this type of research, and provide scholars an opportunity to review how peers are handling these methodological complexities.

In summary, this book is a valuable collection of up-to-date findings that view family interactions and relationships through a communication lens. This is a noteworthy compilation for the field of communication studies, and a valuable resource for related disciplines that research families. I

recommend this book as an excellent text for a graduate course, a potential text for an advanced undergraduate course, and a beneficial resource for scholars interested in explaining and understanding family relationships.

The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships

Edited by Anita L. Vangelisti and Daniel Perlman (2006). New York: Cambridge University Press, 891 pp.

**Reviewed by Hans-Werner Bierhoff
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Good news for all scholars who have a scientific interest in the study of personal relationships: *The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships* is an up-to-date source which is not only comprehensive, reliable, and balanced, but an indispensable work of reference. Due to the fact that personal relationships are a research topic of various scientific disciplines, the approach of the editors is an interdisciplinary one. Contributing authors are affiliated with the Department of Psychology, Department of Sociology, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, the Institute of Child Development, Department of Management and Marketing, Department of Communication, Department of Anthropology, and Department of Psychiatry among others. Most of the authors are affiliated with psychology, sociology, and communication, reflecting the fact that these disciplines are currently the most involved and most productive fields in relationship research. The 41 chapters, which were written by 65 authors, provide key knowledge on personal relationships, the most important theoretical perspectives, and extensive empirical research, which is presented in detail. The edition is an invaluable source of reference as demonstrated by the fact that the index of the handbook comprises 100 pages! The subject index is excellent, one of the best that I have ever seen. In addition, a complete author index is provided.