Relational Maintenance Within Families

CHAPTER PREVIEW

1. Relational Maintenance in Different Family Relationships

2. Maintenance through Confirmation

3. Maintenance through Rituals

4. Maintenance through Relational Currencies

SEPARATION ANTICIPATION

Since they were born, identical twins Charlie and Noel have never been apart. Although they have a group of friends that they hang out with, neither one has many individual friends. They are each other's best friend. Both play in the high school orchestra, Charlie on the saxophone and Noel on the drums. They have been summer camp counselors at a day camp and have spent their evenings playing basketball or hanging out at the community pool. Because they live in Annapolis, MD, they also go swimming and crabbing in the bay. They are entering their senior year and both wonder how they will remain connected after high school graduation.

When the twins think about their futures, each imagines going down quite a different road. Noel wants to go to college at the U.S. Naval Academy and then join the Navy in order to earn enough money to go to law school. He assumes he will join a local law practice until he can go out on his own. But, at the Naval Academy, cadets have very little time to do anything but study and train to become a Naval Officer. During the summer, the cadets train on ships, so they are not home for

long. Charlie imagines that, when he graduates from college, he will eventually teach high school or, eventually, at a college. That would mean many years of graduate school. Both brothers are concerned about how they will stay connected to each other during the time when they will be living far away from each other.

STAYING CLOSE WHILE FAR APART

When Desmond received orders to deploy to Afghanistan as part of his military service, his wife, Samiera, immediately began imagining how she and their daughters (ages 8, 5, and 3) would stay closely connected to him for the next 18 months. Samiera decided to talk with some of the other mothers living on the Army base to learn how they managed the separation. After a week of discussions, she collected a list of possibilities; she talked with the girls about what each one might wish to do and began to plan what she, herself, would do to stay close to her husband. Then, she and Desmond discussed what would make him feel connected during the long separation.

Each girl decided to fill a fancy envelope with locks of hair, photos, and drawings. Desmond decided to video-record himself reading stories that each girl liked to hear at bedtime. Samiera made a small photo book of wedding and family pictures. The girls put a map of Afghanistan and a collage of Daddy pictures on the kitchen wall. Everyone looked forward to video chats and e-mail correspondence.

What keeps partners and family members in a close, trusting relationship for years? For instance, how well do you think Samiera and Desmond's plan to stay in touch during his deployment will work? Or in sibling relationships, what explains the importance of strong sibling ties in later life? How might Charlie and Noel maintain their sibling relationship and adult friendship despite the different paths in life that each of them might take after graduating from their respective schools? Members of successful partnerships and healthy families sustain their ties by enacting caring, compassionate, and companionate behaviors that sustain long-lasting relationships. Family connections, sometimes solid and sometimes fragile, reflect members' communicative efforts to create, manage, and keep their connections going. Some relationships are maintained at low to moderate levels of connection for long time-periods, however, as many family relationships never reach deeper levels of intimacy.

In this chapter, we focus on family communication behaviors that enact relational maintenance. In the first section, we consider the concept of communication and relational maintenance in families; this is then followed by a discussion of the relational maintenance strategies of confirmation, respect, rituals, and relational currencies. As we discuss relationship maintenance, you will see a continuation of some of the concepts related to family identity that we addressed in Chapter 4, as family identity is central to how we communicate to keep relationships going strong.

RELATIONAL MAINTENANCE IN DIFFERENT FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Much of the time, family relationships just *are*. We live them, but seldom analyze them. The ordinary, routine behaviors of life carry us through each day, usually in a patterned and often unreflective way. Nevertheless, we *communicatively maintain* our families through both everyday interactions and/or explicit efforts. **Relationship maintenance** refers to the actions and activities that an individual uses to preserve and/or improve a relationship.[1] We maintain our family relationships through both routine and strategic communication. Routine behaviors include driving a child to school each morning or asking about a teenager's day during dinner. More intentional maintenance efforts require planning and the use of strategic behaviors, such as selecting a gift to please a partner on her birthday, attending a child's soccer game, or apologizing after a fight.

According to relationships scholar Steve Duck, relational maintenance encompasses the "huge area where relationships continue to exist between the point of their initial development and their possible decline."[2] Relational mainte-nance involves keeping a relationship: (a) in existence, (b) in a state of connected-ness, (c) in a satisfactory condition, and (d) in repair.[3] Relational maintenance behaviors range from talking about everyone's day at dinner, to planning romantic birthday celebrations, to dealing with relational struggles as they occur or supporting the other through a rough time.

How does communication contribute to relational maintenance? What do you believe keeps a relationship thriving? According to communication scholar Kathryn Dindia, in order for us to maintain the quality of our personal relationships (including our family ties), we must maintain the quality of our communication.[4] Although more is involved, talk is the essence of relational maintenance. Such talk may involve discussing individual needs, negotiating new behaviors, or forgiving one another. Why does this everyday relational maintenance matter? The answer is that efforts toward maintaining relationships help keep members together and more satisfied with their family ties.[5]

Relational maintenance differs across partnerships and family forms because adult ties differ from ties between parents and children, or among siblings. Whereas most marriages or partnerships involve *voluntary* adult relationships, parent–child or sibling relationships are essentially *involuntary*, although most develop depth through voluntary connectedness across the lifespan. Stepfamily relationships involve maintaining both involuntary (parent–child) and voluntary (stepparent–stepchild) ties. Because adults choose whether to nurture their ties but young children do not have the emotional maturity to be mindful about building a relationship, most relational maintenance studies focus on marriages or other adult partnerships, which depend on intentionality. But many adult siblings find they have to work at maintaining close ties because most have become partners and/or

parents: they have multiple immediate family commitments and their extended family ties tend to lose priority. In the following sections, we will explore how communication facilitates relational maintenance in marital (or romantic) partnerships, parent–child relationships, and sibling relationships before turning our attention to specific behaviors that enhance relational maintenance across all types of family relationships.

Marital/Partnership Maintenance

Folk wisdom suggests that over time, romance moves into reality. Although most romantic partnerships experience moments or periods of great intimacy, everyday life always intrudes with its pragmatic demands, such as managing health, financial issues, or career demands. Parents of younger children find that often their time is dominated by their children's needs. In this section, we will discuss marriages as well as long-term committed partnerships, because an increasing number of unmarried persons are involved in romantic, long-term, committed relationships.

It may come as little surprise to you that marital maintenance has received extensive attention from researchers. When studying the first two years of marriage, for example, one research team found that spouses typically start their marriages with extraordinarily high levels of love and satisfaction, yet these feelings tend to level out, and in some cases dwindle, as time passes.[6] People develop predictable routines and become more aware of their partner's flaws. Eventually, couples face relational reality, including disenchantment. Partners who maintain strong positive feelings for each other in the early years, however, have a better chance of maintaining this relationship for many years.[7] Researchers have also identified 13 categories of daily talk that characterize the everyday conversations of satisfied couples, including self-reports, observations, back-channel comments, talk about another person, TV talk, partner's experiences, miscellaneous comments, household tasks, humor, plans, narratives, positivity, and conflict.[8] Although most studies of relational maintenance focus on heterosexual married couples, researchers have generally found tremendous similarity in the relational maintenance of same-sex marital relationships, albeit with one notable exception, that gay and lesbian partners report sharing time together (i.e., spending leisure time engaging in joint activities) more often than heterosexual couples.[9]

Because relationships inevitably involve stresses and challenges, partners need to communicate openly and regularly in order to cope with difficulties and maintain their connections.[10] *Marital resilience* implies a process in which couples respond to difficulties and purposefully engage in maintenance behaviors, communication, and actions to repair, sustain, and thereby continue relationships in the ways they want them to be.[11] Maintenance behaviors can promote relational resilience by preventing relationships from decaying and by helping repair relational damage. Communication scholars Laura Stafford and Daniel Canary have worked to identify

the behaviors couples use to maintain their relationships.[12] These include the following:

- *Positivity* includes communicating in a cheerful and optimistic way with one's partner.

- *Openness* includes self-disclosing one's thoughts and feelings in general, as well as explicitly discussing the relationship and sharing thoughts and feelings about relational problems.

- *Assurances* include messages of affection, support, and commitment, implying the relationship has a future.

- Maintaining *social networks* includes involving family and friends in activities, as well as sharing interconnected networks and social support.

- *Sharing tasks* includes conveying a sense of equity or jointly performing tasks and performing one's "fair share" of the household work.

The importance and intensity of relationship maintenance behaviors vary across relationships. Interactions with a marital or romantic partner may involve more intense use of these strategies than interactions with a sister or nephew. On the other hand, assurances tend to endure over time, so the need for constant assurance is not as great as the ongoing need for positivity.

As we noted earlier, scholars who study relational maintenance of same-sex partnerships have found very similar maintenance behaviors to those used by heterosexual partners, although gay and lesbian partnerships may experience additional stresses.[13] Most same-sex partners desire to live and work in environments supportive of the relationship, to be "out" in their social network, to be able to introduce the other person as one's "partner," and to spend time with others who accept these relationships. A comparison of the relational maintenance practices of same-sex partners and marital partners revealed that the range of behaviors reported was quite similar, with the most commonly reported maintenance behavior being shared tasks.[14]

Although you may think that maintaining satisfying relationships seems somewhat mysterious at times, in the end, many researchers have highlighted the particular importance of interacting positively via nonverbal displays of affection (e.g., touching, smiling, laughing) and verbal compliments.[15] In one longitudinal examination of marital maintenance, for example, scholars found that maintenance behaviors sustained partners' desired relational definitions and that the effective use of such behaviors predicted their future marital satisfaction.[16] The couples in this study also reaffirmed the importance of positivity, assurances, and similar social networks. In a follow-up investigation, the same research team found that partners' use of maintenance behaviors is interdependent; a spouse's perception of satisfaction

and commitment is associated with both their own and their partner's use of maintenance behaviors.[17]

Although most researchers assume that individuals engage in maintenance behaviors to support the relationship, this is not always the case. For example, communication scholars James Ragsdale and Frances Brandau-Brown studied individual characteristics, such as self-monitoring and Machiavellianism, that might influence the types of relational maintenance strategies married partners use in their relationship.[18] They raised the possibility that men, who are skilled in modifying their self-presentation, tend to emphasize positivity in an attempt to create an advantageous climate. In addition, other researchers have found that secure individuals use more assurances, romantic affection, and openness than do dismissive individuals who are uncomfortable with closeness and commitment.[19]

Those in long-distance partnerships confront special challenges, such as the military family depicted at the beginning of this chapter. Certain strategies, such as sharing tasks and sharing social networks, may not be highly relevant. If partners' ongoing ties depend almost totally on mediated messages, they may avoid difficult topics, resulting in relational stagnation. Yet, when there are at least limited opportunities for face-to-face interactions, partners are more likely than not to experience ongoing relational maintenance needs.[20] Consequently, the pressure to share "good" times together results in the use of more face-to-face positivity, although avoiding problematic topics eventually leads to distancing and dissatisfaction.

Parent and Child Relational Maintenance

In addition to marital (and romantic) partners, researchers have also considered how parents and children maintain their relationships, especially as children age into adolescence and young adulthood. Although parents of small children enact most of the consciously chosen affection messages, even a toddler learns how to delight a parent with a hug or a kiss. At a much later point in life, caretaking may be reversed, as an adult child brings favorite foods and a grandson's drawings to his or her parent in a nursing home. As parent and child relationships shift from vertical to more horizontal, responsibility for relational maintenance becomes shared. Across years and life stages, through conversation and negotiation, parents and children learn how to stay connected, even as children need more independence and develop personal preferences for expressing connectedness. Conversely, changes in parents' lives affect their desires or needs for connection. During adolescence, most parents and children express varied needs for autonomy and connection; in later years, when adult children become parents, the autonomy–connection struggles with their own parents may intensify. In some cases, midlife adults may find themselves maintaining critical ties with two or three other generations,[21] as we see in the following example:

My father takes such good care of his mother, who has suffered with Alzheimer's for many years. Every Saturday morning, he picks her up at the nursing home and takes her to the local Corner Bakery for breakfast. He holds her hand from the car to the restaurant and settles her into a chair. Dad orders oatmeal for her and a muffin for himself, plus two coffees in paper cups with lids. He feeds her the oatmeal while she stares into space. He also helps her manage some of the coffee. Dad talks to Grandma about the family and sometimes, he touches her hand. Then, after about 25 minutes, they head back to the car.

Highly complicated family structures require more attention to relational maintenance; this may involve other relatives or step-relatives who assume some or all parental responsibilities for a child. In many cases, the establishment of a relational tie with a stepchild or stepparent involves a set of negotiations, ranging from "What do I call you?" to "How can we build a tie without hurting my father?" Many stepfamilies are formed through voluntary ties between adults and (often) involuntary ties between stepparents and stepchildren, resulting in limited efforts to build new ties. Frequently, even the form of address becomes a contested issue, as it relates to establishing ties; for instance, a child may resist calling a stepmother "Mom" or an adult child may refer to his stepfather as "my Mom's husband."[22] Finally, in some families, grandparents assume major parental responsibilities that necessitate a renegotiation of roles and relational maintenance activities.[23] We will continue our discussion of these relationships, as well as other relational maintenance behaviors in parent–child relationships, in Chapter 10.

Sibling or Stepsibling Relational Maintenance

Sibling ties represent the longest lifetime relationships for most people, but, until recently, little was known about how these ties are maintained through communication. Siblings may develop ties with each other before creating strong ties with their peers; at certain life stages, such as middle childhood, they spend more time with each other than with their parents.[24] During adolescence, siblings tend to spend more time with friends, especially if they are not very close in age. In early adulthood, they begin to connect or reconnect, forming adult ties.

The long-term nature of the sibling bond depends on the extent to which individuals engage in relational maintenance efforts. In an examination of relational maintenance behaviors in college-age sibling relationships, communication scholar Scott Myers and his colleagues revealed that, although siblings are involuntarily linked, most report having a commitment to this relationship beyond obligatory ties.[25] In their study of 257 individuals ranging in age from 18 to 90, siblings reported using the maintenance behavior of sharing tasks most frequently and the

behavior of openness least frequently. This differs from other familial ties, such as partners or husbands and wives, as noted in the list above. Myers and his team also found that the more siblings liked each other, the more likely they were to use all five maintenance strategies. As some scholars have argued, sibling alliances help maintain relationships because they represent a combination of joint efforts.[26] For instance, in a follow-up study of sibling maintenance behaviors, Myers identified 53 maintenance behaviors that represented five strategies: (a) sharing tasks, (b) shared social networks, (c) avoidance of negativity, (d) humor, and (e) confirmation or validation of their involvement in each other's lives.[27] Indeed, when siblings are motivated to communicate with each other because they consider it pleasant, enjoyable, supportive, relaxing, and inclusive, they feel that such interactions are satisfying and promote closeness.[28]

In general, researchers studying maintenance of siblings have concluded: (a) female siblings use relational maintenance behaviors more frequently than males, (b) more intimate adult siblings use maintenance behaviors more frequently than those in congenial or apathetic relationships, (c) the use of maintenance efforts in early or middle adulthood depends on the level of psychological closeness, and (d) maintenance behaviors are used more strategically than routinely. If you have siblings, how many of these findings apply to you? As Myers observed, when adult siblings enact relational maintenance strategies, they "provide emotional, moral and psychological support, fulfill familial responsibilities, engage in shared activities, and remain involved in each other's lives."[29] This is illustrated by the following excerpt:

> *I have six brothers and sisters, and we are spread across the country from coast to coast. We all make an effort to keep in touch with each other through e-mail, blogging, Facebook, Skype, phone calls, text messages, and visits. Much of our communication is focused around certain tasks, such as going in together on a gift for Mother's Day or planning a family reunion or a visit. We provide each other emotional support through the ups and downs of life, such as acceptance into graduate school, marriage, pregnancy loss, unemployment, and illness. We are also in frequent contact about less monumental things: a text to my sister to see what she thought about the final episode of our favorite TV show or a quick online chat with my brother on his birthday. As far-flung as we are geographically, all of these activities help us to feel close emotionally.*

As you can see from this example, adult siblings frequently confront the challenge of maintaining connections across many miles while raising their own children. In adulthood, many siblings pay greater attention to each other,

communicating in ways that create positivity, strengthen connections, and provide counsel.[30] Yet, some siblings drift apart over the years, having never recovered from earlier slights or fights. In some cases, external factors support overall family relational maintenance. For example, an elderly parent's needs may prevent the dissolution of an otherwise distant sibling tie as siblings continue to coordinate the collective care of the aging parent. In other families, sibling relationships continue in a stagnant state because geographically close members gather ritualistically for holidays but maintain less meaningful ties.

As you think about your siblings (if you have siblings), how effective are you at maintaining a connection with each one? How might you improve the ways you sustain relational ties? Maintaining relationships requires attention and effort. When family members consciously focus on keeping their relationships strong, they are rewarded with strong ties. In addition to the family-identity-building strategies noted in the previous chapter, three major communication strategies serve to strengthen family relationships: confirmation, rituals, and relational currencies.

MAINTENANCE THROUGH CONFIRMATION

As the cornerstone of relational maintenance, **confirmation** occurs when one person communicates with another person in ways that validate the other person as a respected human being.[31] Confirming messages communicate recognition and acceptance of another human, which are fundamental preconditions to intimacy. In order for a message to qualify as confirming, it must: (a) acknowledge the other person's existence, (b) affirm the other person's communication by responding relevantly to it, (c) reflect and accept the other person's self-experience, and (d) suggest a willingness to become involved with the other person.[32] Confirming responses imply an acceptance of the other person, but not necessarily the other person's position on a given topic. That is, confirming messages do not necessarily suggest one person agrees with the other; responses such as "I see" display one's regard without expressing agreement.[33] Although it should be self-evident that confirming messages enhance family relationships, unfortunately, many family members do not confirm each other.

Confirming messages may be contrasted with two alternative message types: rejecting and disconfirming messages. Rejecting responses, such as "That's really stupid" or "Don't act like a 2-year-old," imply that the other person is wrong or that their perspective is unacceptable. Disconfirming responses send an invalidating message, telling the other "You do not exist." Disconfirming responses occur when a family member ignores another member, talks about the other person as if he or she is invisible, or excludes another from a conversation or physical contact,[34] as we see in the following example:

When my sister remarried, she and her new husband tried to pretend they did not have her 12-year-old son Paul living with them. Her new husband did not really want him. They would eat meals and forget to call him to the table. Neither parent would check Paul's homework or pay attention to the friends he spent time with. They would plan trips and drop him with us at the last minute, and never check on his work in school. The kid was invisible in that house. Finally, his grandfather took him, and Paul seems much happier now.

Recognition, Dialogue, and Acceptance Characterize Confirmation

Recognition means you acknowledge the other person's existence and indicate a willingness to be involved with the other. One may confirm another's existence verbally, which includes using the person's name, including him or her in conversation, or just acknowledging the individual's presence. Comments such as "How was your day?" "I missed you" or "I'm glad to see you" serve to confirm another person's existence. Nonverbal confirmation is equally important in the recognition process: touch, direct eye contact, smiles, and gestures also may serve to confirm another person within the norms of diverse cultures. Children of families in which all members exchange confirming messages develop a positive self-image.

Dialogue refers to an interactive, conversational involvement between two or more persons. Comments such as "Because I said so" and "You'll do it my way or not at all" discount the other person and do not reflect a dialogical attitude, whereas comments such as "What do you think?" or "I'm upset—can we talk about it?" open the door to dialogue and mutual exploration. Nonverbal dialogue occurs in families when members share appropriate displays of affection and recognize each other with a smile or a "thumbs up."

Acceptance occurs when we allow others to be themselves. Acceptance avoids interpreting or judging one another. It encourages you to hear things you do not want to hear or work to understand another's perspective, even if you disagree with it. If you feel accepted in a relationship, disagreements do not challenge your sense of connection with the other person.

Confirming behavior in a current relationship often reflects one's family-of-origin patterns. Individuals who grew up in an inexpressive family may have trouble satisfying the reassurance and recognition needs of a partner or a child. Often, this occurs in families characterized by low cohesion. Cultural differences, like the use of eye contact or touch, may create a sense of disconfirmation for one partner. This can be problematic, since family connections develop from each member's sense of acceptance. When family members continuously ignore each other or withhold

affirming messages, relational maintenance remains an impossible goal. If one "learns to love by being loved," then one *only* learns to confirm by being confirmed.

Respect Characterizes Confirmation

Similar to acceptance, **respect** involves acting in a way that demonstrates honoring and caring for another and his or her well-being. Sometimes respect involves supporting another's choices, values, and actions, even though you view the person as unwise or difficult to relate to. Many family members struggle when another member makes decisions that appear to reject family values or expectations, such as becoming a chef rather than a lawyer or choosing to remain childless when other siblings have chosen parenthood.

Respect involves two primary content components: equality/mutuality and caring/supportiveness.[35] The first component implies a horizontal relationship characterized by respect or treating the other as a valued person. Among adults, this implies that family members honor other members' choices and decisions, even if they do not fully understand or value those choices. In a parent–child relationship, this would imply encouraging children to make their own decisions and choices, appropriate to their ages. Therefore, respect may mean supporting the child who chooses to become involved in theater when everyone else in the family pursues athletics, and attending these child's plays just as parents attend another child's soccer games. Often, this involves honoring another's decision that challenges your expectations. To communicate a sense of equality or mutuality means that we relate in ways that avoid judgmental attitudes and sentiments.[36] We see the relational value of respect in the following narrative:

> *My parents migrated from the Philippines when my younger sister and I were in elementary school, so we grew up in a much wider world, and learned to speak English fluently. We both attended a local college where my sister met her fiancé, Joseph, whose relatives arrived from Ireland in the early 1900s. His parents were accepting of his marriage plans, but this was very hard for my parents. They did not forbid the marriage, and after a few years, due to his kindness to all of us, my parents came to respect and embrace Joseph and treat him like another son.*

The second characteristic of communicating respect, supportiveness and care, implies engaging in "behaviors that are reciprocally thoughtful, considerate, and designed to 'lift up' another."[37] Such actions are as simple as visiting a family member in the hospital although it interferes with holiday plans, or helping your aunt with her computer problems again and again. Although respect often implies honoring elders, the reverse also holds true: a teenager witnessing a parent's

alcoholism or abuse may find it challenging or impossible to respect that individual because of the pain that results from those circumstances.

Respect overlaps with the concept of relational currencies, a concept that we will address later in this chapter. If you know a person well, you will be able to provide messages of affirmation, caring, or love by using the currencies valued by the other person. In the end, family members who communicate in ways that accept, validate, and respect another person's perspective learn to confirm others inside and outside of their family system.

MAINTENANCE THROUGH RITUALS

A second way that family members maintain their relationships over time is through the enactment of different rituals. Rituals convey a variety of messages and meanings in emotionally powerful patterns; they remind family members who they are and how much they care about each other, as they reflect a family's relational culture. As communication scholar Judy Pearson and her colleagues observed, "Rituals are an essential type of everyday, lived communication behavior, beneficial to the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships."[38] In the following sections, we will briefly explore different rituals that characterize family systems, couples' relationships, and intergenerational ties, as well as rituals that both facilitate and hinder relational health and well-being. As you read each section, remember that couples and families develop and enact ritualized behaviors that keep relationships together, as this brief example illustrates:

> *One thing we NEVER do is go to bed alone. Ever. I don't go upstairs and get in bed and then Robert comes up later. Or vice versa. When we go to bed, we both go to bed. Together.*[39]

Family Rituals

Conscious repetition of actions and words creates meaning and eventually results in ongoing family rituals. **Family rituals** are communication events that are voluntary, recurring, and patterned, and "whose jointly enacted performance by family members pays homage to what they regard as sacred, thereby producing and reproducing a family's identity and its web of social relations."[40] Rituals connect members in meaningful ways; when enacted in repetitive form, they contribute significantly to the establishment and preservation of a family's identity or relational culture as they honor something important in the relationship.[41] Rituals become more than routine events; they serve a highly significant relational maintenance

function. They may cluster around occasions such as dinnertime, vacations, and religious celebrations, or rites of passage such as birthdays, graduations, holidays, and weddings. Sometimes, rituals form around negative situations, such as conflicts, discipline, or teasing. Such symbolic activity helps family members make sense of their lives. Rituals function as communication events that lead to sense-making, which involves remembering, belonging, instructing, and providing community.[42]

Family rituals range from those enacted by large groups, such as celebrating Thanksgiving, to those known only to a few members, such as spiritual rituals, anniversary rituals, and other everyday behaviors. According to scholars, rituals may be categorized in the following manner:[43]

- *Family celebrations*, often tied to cultural norms, include the way holidays are celebrated or the manner by which special events are recognized.

- *Family traditions*, reflecting unique family occasions, embody patterns passed down by family of origin members.

- *Patterned family interactions* reflect everyday connections and often emerge implicitly out of increasingly patterned (or habitual) interactions.

Although many significant family rituals involve recurring calendar-related events, such as holidays—for example, Thanksgiving softball games—rituals also occur in communicative moments that define everyday life for family members, such as bedtime for children or having breakfast together in the morning. In essence, rituals give an ascribed meaning to ongoing patterned interactions.[44]

Couple Rituals

In addition to family system rituals, a couple's expressions of affection, code words or secrets, and repetitive daily or weekly experiences indicate a developing relational culture. Communication researcher Carol Bruess has researched extensively relationship rituals and identified rituals both for couples[45] and for parents with young children.[46] Based on her early interview research, she developed the following typology of couple rituals:[47]

- *Couple time.* This frequently enacted ritual includes three types: (a) enjoyable activities, (b) togetherness rituals, and (c) escape episodes. Enjoyable activities are illustrated by the couple who reports that "playing volleyball every Tuesday" or watching foreign films brings them closer together. Togetherness refers to times when couples simply spend time being together, such as walks after dinner. Escape episodes include rituals specifically designed to satisfy couples' needs to be alone. Escape rituals provide "shared time," such as a monthly overnight stay in a hotel, which help partners create boundaries around themselves.

- *Idiosyncratic/symbolic rituals.* These rituals are divided into: (a) favorites, (b) private codes, (c) play rituals, and (d) celebration rituals. Favorites include couples' most valued, and often symbolic, places to go, things to eat, items to purchase or give, and activities. For example, one woman reported that her husband's favorite cake is her "wicky-wacky chocolate cake": "So, when I really, really, really, really like him, and he's really, really, really, really made me happy, I bake him a wicky-wacky cake. He knows I'm really happy with him when he gets a wicky-wacky cake."[48] Private code rituals include the repeated, idiosyncratic use of jointly developed words, symbols, or gestures for communicating. These have a unique and special meaning. Play rituals represent intimate fun in the form of couples' kidding, teasing, silliness, and/or playful bantering. Celebration rituals represent the shared practices couples enact when celebrating special holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, or other special events. Most involve established rules. One couple may celebrate every month's anniversary; another may have elaborate birthday surprise rituals.

- *Daily routines/tasks.* These rituals involve daily shared patterns and accomplishing ordinary activities, tasks, and chores. For instance, one partner will cook and the other cleans up.

- *Intimacy expressions.* These rituals involve physical, symbolic, and verbal expressions of love, fondness, affection, or sexual attraction. Intimacy rituals link to relational currencies, which we describe later in this chapter.

- *Communication rituals.* These rituals encompass couple talk time, including the specific times and ways couples establish opportunities for talking, sharing, or staying in touch, such as debriefing conversations, couch time, regular cell phone calls, or text messages.

- *Patterns/habits/mannerisms.* These rituals involve interactional, territorial, and/or situational patterns or habits couples develop. For example, partners may always sleep on the same side of the bed or sit in the same chairs to watch television.

- *Spiritual rituals.* Certain rituals serve couples' religious needs, such as praying or attending worship services together, saying grace before meals, or celebrating Shabbat weekly.

Rituals serve to maintain partners' relationships and signal their *coupleness* to the outside world. In marriage, rituals support partners' efforts to create a "marital culture."[49] In their study of couples with children, Bruess and her colleagues identified rituals that keep partners connected while actively involved in parenting; these included examples such as putting the kids to bed together and, after they

fall asleep, sitting in the room to talk about their day or current problems, or off-road biking together on weekends.[50] Such rituals keep the couples highly connected.

Many daily rituals involve conversations that, on the surface, appear to carry little meaning, such as "What's for dinner?" or "How's the homework going?" Yet, even these conversations are important to maintaining relationships. In one study of couples' daily conversations, for example, researchers identified 13 categories of couple conversations that might be considered routine, but not necessarily all the time.[51] These researchers addressed the differences in strategic versus routine couple conversations. For instance, a leisurely Saturday breakfast each week may become a highly meaningful ritual because it represents "their" time together to catch up.

One infrequent couple ritual involves the renewal of marriage vows. After interviewing couples who participated in such a ritual, one of the authors of your textbook, Dawn O. Braithwaite and her colleague Leslie Baxter suggested that couples use this ceremonial event to weave together their past, their present, and their future commitments to one another.[52] This ritual serves to maintain, rather than repair, the relationship, while communicating ongoing commitment to each other and a larger network of family and friends. In a later study of individuals engaged in a vow renewal ritual, Baxter and Braithwaite found the experience allowed couples to link two different idealizations of marriage: the public marriage, experienced with a community, and the private marriage of two expressive people.[53] As their research and other examples mentioned above demonstrate, countless couple rituals exist, but often their meaning remains overlooked.

Intergenerational Rituals

A third way that rituals help maintain family relationships is to bond family members of all ages across generations, providing a sense of family identity and connection. Rituals frequently involve parents and children and, on occasion, grandparents or other relatives. For example, a family may come together for a yearly reunion or during a particular holiday in a way that celebrates the family and maintains relationships and family identity across generations.

In a recent study of the variety and value of family of origin rituals experienced by South African young adults, researchers asked young adults to describe certain rituals and discuss the symbolic meaning or value they attach to these rituals.[54] The most significant theme emerging from the narratives involved the importance of the family history or family story and the need to remember "where we came from," as well as to maintain family memories that have been passed from generation to generation through storytelling rituals.

Frequently, grandparents establish rituals with their grandchildren in order to reinforce their special connections. These may include regular phone calls, e-mails, sleepovers, special meals, everyday care, or summer trips, as indicated by this grandchild:

Ever since I was 5 years old, my grandfather has taken me on a trout fishing weekend in the mountains. He rents a cabin at a fishing camp. We spend most of the day in the streams and cook on a grill every night. Then, we sit and stare at the stars and talk about life—usually this is really about me. Over the years, the conversations have changed from my baseball games to my career plans, but generally he asks and listens. Hopefully, these will go on for a long time.

As families change over time, members discontinue or update their rituals. Sometimes changes in gender roles impact couple satisfaction with family rituals. For example, men appear to be happier when their partners report more family investment in rituals, but the more husbands reported their investment in family rituals, the less happy and close their wives are. This may occur because women view their husbands as intrusive, or find them to be critical of their plans and preparations.[55] Rituals reflect societal change, as indicated by divorce recognition greeting cards and divorce ceremonies, as well as gay male and lesbian marriages and commitment ceremonies.

Stepfamily and Single-Parent Rituals

In addition to intergenerational rituals, scholars have also studied rituals in different family structures, as many stepfamilies or blended families struggle with the place of ritual in their lives. Their challenge is to selectively embrace certain features of both former families while creating new ones, so that members of both old and new family structures feel connected. As with other family forms, successful family rituals in the stepfamily "hold both sides" of the contradiction between old and new family systems. Researchers studying stepfamily rituals reveal that: (a) some unsuccessful rituals carried over from the former family are perceived to threaten the new family, and (b) ritual practices help well-functioning stepparents and stepchildren accept the historical roots of their stepfamily while constructing the new one.[56] In her study of post-bereaved stepfamilies (those formed after the death of a parent), communication researcher Leah Bryant identified three different family experiences: (a) *integrated* families created rituals to memorialize and celebrate the deceased parent's life, such as taking flowers to the grave, (b) *denial* families had no rituals acknowledging the deceased parent, and (c) *segmented* families struggled with the presence–absence tension, often engaging in rituals that avoided direct acknowledgment of the deceased parent.[57] Stepfamily researchers have indicated a need for adapting old ritualized behaviors, as well as creating new rituals that bond stepfamily members.[58]

Solo parents may find they go against society's more traditional images of certain holiday rituals, like a father cutting the turkey at Thanksgiving while the

mother finishes setting the table, or two parents sharing coffee while watching their children open Christmas gifts. Single parents may have to shop for children's Christmas presents or stuff Easter baskets alone. However, most single parents make an effort to create special rituals for certain holidays and special circumstances. In fact, in one study of rituals that provide meaning for single–parent families, researchers identified six types of rituals that connected family members:[59]

- *Connection* rituals involved many of the mundane activities of family life, including reviewing homework together, having a meal together, taking daily walks, or talking about daily activities.

- *Spiritual* rituals, such as attending weekly church services or praying before each meal, helped provide meaning and sense of peace in single-parent families.

- *Love* rituals included verbally and/or nonverbally expressing affection on a regular basis, such as saying "I love you" or snuggling before bedtime each night.

- *Recreational* rituals involved family vacations and routine visits to extended family members.

- *Celebration* rituals included specific holiday celebrations, such as Christmas at Grandma's house, or meaningful milestones in a child's developmental growth, such as a high school graduation.

- *Evolving* rituals described those activities that were unique to a particular single-parent family and instilled the family's values of responsibility, consistency, structure, and knowledge.

Rituals and Health

Beyond the relational benefits that come from enacting different rituals, scholars have also found that rituals may be good for family members' physical and emotional health. For example, in a study of children with asthma, researchers found that when young people perceive their families as supporting frequent and symbolic events, such as dinnertime or annual celebrations, they experience their family as more cohesive and less conflictual than families without such rituals. In addition, because asthma may increase overall life stress and anxiety, rituals provide a sense of stability.[60]

Family rituals tend to provide socio-emotional support, especially when family members experience high stress.[61] In physically stressful situations, such as an acute health crisis, cultural rituals may vary. When a family member faces serious illness, various rituals are viewed as normative at different phases; these rituals might

include bedside vigils in hospitals and funeral rituals.[62] Latino culture supports frequent visits by extended family members to the patient's hospital room, and in Greek culture, a mother, even of a married son, would be expected to attend to her dying offspring in the hospital. Public family prayer rituals at the bedside and in houses of worship are common when a member is seriously ill or dying.

Finally, there are rituals that emerge from economic status. For example, in some low-income families from large urban cities, many single mothers find themselves walking their children to school and back each day because they have to travel through gang territory. These children are either kept in their homes after school or told to stay on the front steps as a way to protect them if gunfire erupts.

Family Ceremonies and Celebrations

As one type of ritual that includes weddings, graduations, and funerals, **family ceremonies** serve as major rites of passage and involve elaborate preparation.[63] Weddings that include friends and family members serve to remind newlyweds of their support systems as they establish their new identity, yet partners who have cohabitated for multiple years may not strongly emphasize the social components of their marriage.[64] In addition, major cultural events such as Thanksgiving or the Fourth of July involve ritualized family celebrations. In one study of Thanksgiving

PHOTO 5.1

Holiday dinners usually involve family rituals

© Monkey Business Images/Shutterstock

rituals, communication scholars identified "chronicling" as the most frequently occurring verbal behavior. **Chronicling** refers to "talk about present events or those of the recent past, in which the communicator updates others by providing information about his or her life."[65] Grandparents and older relatives are likely to elicit this news from children, and the extended kinship network participates by sharing their news.

Although most family members experience identification and connection through their rituals, these opportunities may not be open to everyone. Participation in ritualistic family celebrations may be limited for members of the gay and lesbian community and those facing multiple setbacks, such as poverty and illness.[66]

Negative Rituals

Although most of the writing and research on family or couple rituals reflects members' attempts to connect and convey caring in a positive manner, some families experience painful, negative rituals. **Negative rituals** are, like other rituals, patterned events that produce and reproduce a family's social relations, but rather than helping to foster positive family identity, the rituals detract from it.[67] For example, family dinners or holidays may be painful and punishing in a family with alcoholic members: The alcoholic may become verbally abusive by calling people names or loudly complaining about the food. Physical abuse might become a ritual. Children in alcoholic families may engage in a Monday morning ritual of watering down a parent's liquor bottles or pouring wine down the sink.[68] Rituals may signal that an unwanted event is occurring in the family. For example, Leslie Baxter and her colleagues studied the remarriage ritual in stepfamilies and found that, for most stepchildren, the remarriage of the parent and stepparent was an empty ritual.[69] Even if they appreciated that this was a positive development in their father's or mother's life, their own ambivalence about the remarriage often took precedence. Sadly, perhaps with their own joy clouding their vision, most parents don't realize the strong emotions their children are feeling about the wedding. Even ordinary circumstances may foster negative rituals; when a younger child mispronounces a word, an older sibling may launch into a list of the child's other verbal mistakes, or when one spouse watches televised sports, the other may complain loudly about being deserted. Partner abuse may also become ritual, such as when a wife goes out with friends and is beaten for her absence and independence.[70] Incest becomes a destructive ritual played out in families when parent–child or sibling boundaries are shattered.

Such negative rituals are difficult to identify because few individuals self-report their negative experiences.[71] For example, one common, but underreported negative ritual in families that occurs among siblings or extended family members, such as cousins, is bullying. To illustrate this, let's take a look at the following "Family

FAMILY MATTERS: WHEN YOUR BULLY IS YOUR RELATIVE

Researchers Keith Berry of the University of South Florida and Tony Adams of Northeastern Illinois University shared stories of family bullying in this ethnographic study from 2010. Through two narratives, the authors approached the questions of "How does one meaningfully reconcile the anger and bitterness felt toward a relative who has repeatedly harmed them?" and "How does a person carry the weight of the past—the accumulation of harmful experiences—into the present and future relationship with the aggressor?"

The opening personal narrative, written by a female student-author in the first author's class (referred to as Victoria, a pseudonym), provided an account of her bullying sister (Lily). Victoria reported that she had a rather normative early childhood with four other female siblings, but as they grew older, her relationship with Lily changed: "My sister's warm connections turned cold" (p. 54). Victoria felt like a punching bag. Lily bullied the other sisters, a pattern that continued through adolescence, until Victoria and Lily finally had a conversation about Lily's destructive behaviors.

The second narrative was written by the author, Tony, about his cousin, Danny. Tony was an only child, and Danny was 10 years older than him. When they were together, "Danny wanted to 'wrestle' me." Tony would scream in pain, but his adult relatives seldom intervened. This "ritual" went on regularly throughout college; when Tony would visit home, Danny would call him a "faggot" or other names. Tony speculates that family members were complicit in the bullying because they perceived Danny might "straighten" Tony; he reflects on how his family, particularly his father, tried to raise him to "be less of a sissy."

Through this ethnographic investigation of family bullying, Berry and Adams proposed an alternative way to understand family bullying, which involves "identifying, comprehending, and maybe even empathizing with the conditions of people's actions" (p. 58). They rejected the notion that family relationships are non-voluntary, and argued instead that families should be understood as chosen and voluntary. More importantly, they suggested that some family communication problems are rooted in deliberate, repeated harm and power-based aggression. By examining an understudied context of bullying in family relationships, Berry and Adams demonstrated that negative rituals in families matter.

For further reading, see Berry, K., & Adams, T. E. (2016). Family bullies. *Journal of Family Communication*, *16*, 51–63.

Matters" to learn more about how negative family rituals can turn into bullying among family members.

MAINTENANCE THROUGH RELATIONAL CURRENCIES

Now that we have discussed how individuals maintain their relationships through confirming messages and the enactment of both positive and negative rituals, let's consider one final form of communication that family members use to sustain meaningful ties with other family members. **Relational currencies** refer to communication behaviors that carry meaning about the affection or caring dimension of

human relationships;[72] think of relational currencies as a vocabulary of loving behaviors, or what some authors refer to as "love languages."[73] Relational currencies serve as a symbolic exchange process. As family members share currencies, they form agreements about their meanings that either strengthen or weaken their relationship. Many currencies arise from family of origin patterns because every family implicitly and explicitly teaches its members specific ways to show caring for others and to accept caring from others.[74] Affection is an important relational currency in families; it is something of value, as the following example illustrates:

> *My family members have always displayed their affection quite openly. I remember as a young child sitting on my father's lap every Sunday to read the comic strips with him. I always hugged my father and mother, and still do. We still hang up our phone calls with the words, "I love you."*

One partner may prepare sushi or tacos to please the other, or a grandfather may learn to use Twitter because his granddaughter likes to communicate that way. Both of these instances represent an attempt to share affection, but the meaning depends on a shared perception of the value of the behavior. In what follows, we will briefly review several different types of relational currencies before concluding this chapter with a discussion of how relational currencies convey different meanings to family members.

Types of Relational Currencies

Certain relational currencies make a direct statement; the act is the message. For example, a hug can mean "I'm glad to see you" or "I'm sad that you are leaving," depending on the circumstances. Usually, the sender's intent is clear and easily interpreted. Other currencies permit a greater range of interpretation. After a family quarrel, does the arrival of flowers mean "I'm sorry, I was wrong" or "I still love you even if we don't agree on one issue"? Multiple relational currencies exist, but over time, some currencies may lose their value as new currencies emerge. The list that follows (see Figure 5.1) presents common ways that family members share affection; you may add to or subtract from this list based on your experiences. Each of these currencies represents one way of sharing affection, as the use of each currency must be considered within the contexts of gender, ethnicity, class, and a family's developmental stage.[75]

As you read about the following relational currencies, think about how these may or may not play a role in relationship maintenance in your own family.

Positive Verbal Statements Such statements include oral, written, and electronic messages indicating love, caring, praise, or support. In some households, people

FIGURE 5.1 *Examples of relational currencies*	Positive verbal statements	Money
	Self-disclosure	Food
	Listening	Favors
	Positive nonverbal affect displays	Service
	Touch	Staying in touch
	Sexuality	Time together
	Aggression	Access rights
	Gifts	

Copyright (© 2015) from *Family communication: Cohesion and change* (9th ed.), by Kathleen M. Galvin, Dawn O. Braithwaite, and Carma L. Bylund. Reproduced by permission of Taylor & Francis.

express affection easily, saying "I love you" directly and frequently. Other families view such directness as unacceptable, preferring to save such words for very special situations. In some cultures, children receive little verbal praise.[76] Within families, age, gender, culture, socioeconomic status, and roles affect this currency.

Self-Disclosure This currency involves self-revelation, or taking the risk of voluntarily telling another individual personal information or feelings that he or she is unlikely to discover from other sources. One way to deepen a relationship involves *continually* reestablishing the emotional connection through openness,[77] although family members do need to consider when and how to open and close privacy boundaries.[78] Generally, self-disclosure serves to deepen understanding between people, although occasionally, it can be a manipulative strategy to gain information from another. As a relational currency, intentional self-disclosure serves to demonstrate trust and affection in a relationship. Consequently, we will discuss this currency in greater detail in Chapter 6.

Listening Effective listening carries a message of involvement with, and attention to, another person. Having a partner or a parent who is willing to listen to your concerns and joys helps build relational rapport; rapport, in turn, develops stronger relational bonds and relational satisfaction.[79] Unfortunately, attentive listening may be taken for granted by some family members, thus discounting the listener's effort.

Positive Nonverbal Affect Displays Affect displays involve spontaneous indications of feelings that may be positive or negative. Positive affect may be best characterized as one's eyes lighting up or face breaking into a smile at the sight of another, as well

as a vocal shift to squeals of delight or softer, more intimate, tones. These nonverbal affect displays indicate joy and comfort at being in the other person's presence.

Touch As a relational currency, touching serves as the language of physical intimacy. Positive physical contact carries a range of messages about caring, concern, love, comfort, or sexual interest. Touch contributes to one's physical and mental well-being. Consequently, touching represents a very powerful currency that conveys feelings that a family member may find difficult to put into words.

Sexuality For adult partners, sexuality provides a unique way to experience intimacy. Partners' talk before, during, and after intercourse, as well as the act itself, combines to create a powerful message of affection and bonding. In fact, communication scholars have recently demonstrated that partners often use positivity and assurances during their post-sex conversations to reinforce their commitment to each other.[80] Conversely, inappropriate sexual contact can destroy family members' ties to each other.

Aggression Aggressive actions, usually thought to be incompatible with affection, may serve to create an important emotional connection between members of certain families. Individuals who are uncomfortable expressing intimacy directly may rely on verbal or physical aggression as signs of caring. Often, children find teasing or poking each other as a way to connect to a sibling. When adults do not know how to express intimacy in constructive ways, they may use bickering, sarcasm, or belittling as their means of contact. For aggression to function as a relational currency, the target of the tease or put-down must be able to interpret these as signs of caring. This involves challenging this aggression, which can result in the partner breaking and revealing what is upsetting him or her.

In addition to these rather personal verbal and nonverbal currencies that convey caring rather directly, other currencies may require more active interpretation in order to translate the level of caring. These include the following, less direct currencies:

Gifts Gifts serve as tangible symbols of caring or remembering the other,[81] and the process of identifying, selecting, and presenting the gift serves as part of the currency. Viewing gifts as currencies may be complicated by issues of cost, appropriateness, and reciprocity. If partners grow up in families with similar attitudes, values, and practices about gifting, celebrating birthdays or other gift-giving events will be comfortable; if the attitudes were dissimilar, partners may confront times of frustration until they establish a joint agreement about how to manage their gift-giving practices. When members of extended families represent divergent financial circumstances, individuals may have to hold discussions about how to manage gift-giving practices.

Money Cash, checks, or gift cards serve as relational currencies in many families. When members of wealthy families use money as the major relational currency, a parent may not convey a message of affection by writing a large check because others view it as impersonal and predictable. To be a relational currency, money must be given or loaned as a sign of affection, not as an easy way to meet a family or spousal obligation. In tough economic times, family members experience giving or receiving money either as an obligation or a gift.

Food A symbol of nurturing in many cultures, food has emerged as an important currency in romantic and family relationships. Preparing and serving special food for a loved one serves as a major sign of affection in many relationships. Today, many younger adults make elaborate meals or special desserts to demonstrate their love; people are increasingly sharing photos or stories of these treats on social media.

Favors Frequently performing helpful, thoughtful acts for another becomes complicated by norms of reciprocity and equality. To be considered as relational currencies, favors must be performed willingly, rather than in response to a spousal or parental order or expectation. The underlying message that one cares may be missed if the recipient takes the effort required by the favor for granted. Favors can be repaid at different times and in different ways, but if favors are not returned, the relationship may become strained.

Service Service implies a caring effort that evolves into a habitual behavior. Often, the service is performed for family members who cannot or will not do it for themselves. Driving the children's carpool to athletic events, making a partner's coffee in the morning or paying the household bills reflect service currencies. Likewise, many adolescents teach their grandparents how to use a personal computer[82] and regularly answer their countless questions about technology. However, such services are frequently taken for granted, thus negating the underlying message of affection.

Staying in Touch This currency implies efforts to maintain important relational ties, often across significant distances or when family members have busy lives. Daily cell phone interaction between parents and college-age students usually conveys caring. Different family members may use different technologies to keep in touch; for example, adolescents may be more likely to text-message each other, but limit this form of communication with their parents.[83] Although e-mail is especially useful for connecting with distant relatives, younger relatives are likely to text each other. Even if the conversations are not about intimate topics, the effort to stay in touch reflects caring.

Time Together Being together, whether it is just "hanging out" or voluntarily accompanying a person on a trip or errand, carries the message "I enjoy being with you." Fathers report great tension between workplace pressures and their desire to spend time with their children as a way of showing that they care.[84] Time together is a subtle currency with potential for being overlooked as an effort to show one cares.

Access Rights Allowing another person to use or borrow things you value is a currency when the permission is intended as a sign of affection. This is a currency due to the exclusive nature of the permission that is given only to people one cares about.

This list of currencies is by no means exhaustive. Across various cultures, currencies may convey different meanings or values. You may identify unnamed currencies that you exchange or that you have observed in family systems. As one example, "doing nothing" can be a loving and powerful message in certain relationships because it conveys trust in what the other person *is* doing.[85] Although a mother might want the laundry folded a certain way, for instance, she may refrain from relaying her preferences to her son who attempted to please her by doing the laundry. As this example and the others we noted above demonstrate, there are a variety of relational currencies that family members can use to display affection and maintain close ties. Of course, how well different currencies work to achieve these goals depends on how the receiving family member(s) interpret them and assign meaning to them.

Meanings and Currencies

Relational satisfaction is tied to perceptions about the relational currency exchange process. Although an individual may intend to convey affection, some family members may misinterpret that person's intentions. As one author opined, "Two of ten people spend their lives searching for one kind of love, when all around them there is love if only they would see."[86] When meanings are shared, rewards are experienced; when meanings are missed, costs are experienced. Over time, intimate partners will create common assumptions about the importance of certain currencies as they develop high levels of symbolic interdependence. Currencies may be exchanged with the best intentions, yet accurate interpretation of your partner's wants and needs occurs only when you both can learn to speak the other person's language.

The question remains: Does every partner realize that his or her favorite dinner or a repaired computer represents an attempt to show love? Perhaps you see others as more loving if they express their affection the same ways you do. Such similarity adds to symbolic interdependence and strengthens your relational culture. Without

common meanings for relational currencies, family members may feel taken for granted or rejected. One partner may place a high value on regular sexual intercourse as a sign of love. If the other partner holds similar views, their sexual experiences will heighten their devotion; if not, these partners will struggle with communicating affection. Likewise, in parent–child relationships, fathers have reported being more affectionate with their sons than their sons reported them being.[87] Such perceptual differences are very common.

Occasionally, routine currencies may become strategic, changing their meaning. Holding hands while taking a walk may be routine touching, but reaching for another's hand after a fight may be strategic. Such a shift frequently reflects new attention to the currency, as noted in the following comment:

> *My mother and I often say "I love you" in a routine way every day as I leave for my summer job. We take the phrase for granted. But, after a fight or if something bad happens to one of us, we tend to look directly at each other and say "I really do love you" just to make sure the message gets across.*

Figure 5.2 provides a way to consider how a currency's meaning might be valued by two people. In quadrant 1, both persons value the currency, which makes communication relatively direct. In quadrants 2 and 3, one party values the currency but the other does not, leading to disappointments and missed messages. In quadrant 4, neither person values the currency; the agreement helps avoid missed messages.

What happens if family members wish to share affection but seem unable to exchange the currencies desired by other members? Researchers concluded that spouses with more similar affection exchange behaviors were more likely to report: (a) high levels of perceived equity, and (b) higher levels of relationship satisfaction, thus greater relationship reward.[88] Interestingly, accuracy in predicting (i.e.,

FIGURE 5.2

Dyadic value of specific relational currency

		Other	
		Yes	No
Self	Yes	You both value the currency	You value the currency, but the other person does not
	No	You do not value the currency, but the other person does	Neither you nor the other person values the currency

Copyright (© 2015) from *Family communication: Cohesion and change* (9th ed.), by Kathleen M. Galvin, Dawn O. Braithwaite, and Carma L. Bylund. Reproduced by permission of Taylor & Francis.

understanding) how the other spouse uses currencies did not raise satisfaction levels. For instance, knowing that your partner shows love through making elaborate meals does not mean that you will be more positive toward this currency if you prefer intimate talks. Individuals who were very accurate at predicting how their spouses would respond to certain currencies still reported low marital satisfaction levels if the couple was dissimilar in their affection behaviors, as indicated in the following:

> When my wife went through a very bad time in her work, we bumped into our differences. My caring solution was to give advice, try to help more around the house, and leave some little gifts for her. These were not having much impact. Cyndi wanted someone to listen to her—empathically listen—not provide a list of suggestions. She wanted to be hugged and she needed verbal reassurance. Fortunately, Cyndi let her needs be known, and in the midst of that self-disclosing conversation, a crisis was turned into an opportunity. Since that time, as I have worked to provide listening, compliments, and hugs, the bond between us has grown stronger.

Exchanging relational currencies benefits family members and significantly affects family intimacy. High-affection communicators receive advantages in psychological, emotional, mental, social, and relational characteristics compared to low-affection communicators.[89] Because of their secure attachment style, they receive more affection from others.

A family's levels of cohesion and adaptability impact its relational currencies. Highly cohesive families may expect high levels of affection displayed with regularity, whereas low-cohesion families may not provide enough affection, according to certain members. In families near the chaotic end of the flexibility continuum, members may vary the types of currencies valued, whereas in a rigid family system, family rules may require the consistent use of a few specific currencies. Family themes may dictate the currencies' exchange: The Hatfields' theme "We stick by each other through thick and thin" means that members must respond to another's needs under any circumstances.

Because a family system evolves constantly, the meaning of currencies changes. Some members change their affection strategies because of new experiences or expectations. For instance, a lost job may result in fewer gifts but greater sharing and doing favors within a family.

Likewise, relational currencies may present challenges in newly formed stepfamilies because members of both original families may differ about ways to share affection. Children of one family might expect an enormous number of presents for their birthdays, whereas the children in the other family expected one big present. New step-grandparents may have to adjust to different styles of holiday

celebrations, or the other family might not celebrate certain holidays at all. However, if members of a newly formed family can learn to "speak the other's language," over time, new, shared currencies will emerge.

We would be remiss if we did not briefly address the challenges to ongoing relational maintenance that occur due to outside everyday stressors, such as hassles and time binds. **Everyday hassles** are "proximal stressors, strains, and transactions of day to day life that can be viewed as common annoyances."[90] Most of these are frequent and continuous contributors to stress; for example, having to pick up a sick child from kindergarten or getting to work late because the plumber was late to fix an overflowing toilet. As a result of these hassles, in many households, parents argue about who is going to change their schedule.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we explored a range of communication practices that maintain partner and familial relationships while attempting to build and sustain closeness among members. One of the most important practical applications you can take from this chapter is that there is no one right way to communicate and maintain relationships. Rather, by providing you with an overview of relational maintenance and a discussion of confirmation, rituals, and relational currencies, our hope is that you now have a better understanding of some meaningful communication behaviors that you can use to strengthen your family relationships.

Think about the kinds of interactions you observe in the families around you. Under what conditions do members confirm each other? How is respect or disrespect for others conveyed? How do members attempt to connect through rituals and relational currencies? To what extent are these communication behaviors reflective of the family's ethnicity? All human beings long for connectedness, but it is a rare family in which the members consciously strive for greater sharing over long periods of time. Such mutual commitment provides rewards known only to those who put forth their best efforts.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you respond to someone who believes that "If you have to work at a relationship, there is something wrong with the relationship?"
2. How might you become a more confirming communicator in your relationships with other family members? How might members of your family take other family members' efforts to be confirming for granted?
3. Is disconfirmation merely the opposite of confirmation? How might individuals be both confirming and disconfirming at the same time?

4. What types of face-to-face rituals does your family enact? What types of mediated rituals does your family enact? And how well do these two types of rituals help your family members maintain their relationships with each other?

5. Looking back at the list of relational currencies that we discussed in this chapter, which currencies mean the most to you in your relationships with other family members? Using either a relationship with one of your parents or with one of your siblings, what are two specific relational currencies that convey affection on the part of each individual? Explain why they convey affection.

6. How are relational currencies and the value they have for maintaining relationships tied to the receiver's interpretation of the currencies?

Key Words

Acceptance	Family rituals
Chronicling	Negative rituals
Confirmation	Recognition
Dialogue	Relational currencies
Everyday hassles	Relationship maintenance
Family ceremonies	Respect

NOTES

1. Pauley, P. M., Hesse, C., & Mikkelson, A. C. (2014). Trait affection predicts married couples' use of relational maintenance. *Journal of Family Communication*, *14*, 167–187.

2. p. 45 in Duck, S. (1994). Steady as (s)he goes: Relational maintenance as a shared meaning system. In D. J. Canary & L. Stafford (Eds.), *Communication and relational maintenance* (pp. 45–60). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

3. Stafford, L. (2010). Measuring relationship maintenance behaviors: Critique and development of the revised relationship maintenance behavior scale. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *28*, 278–303.

4. Dindia, K. (2003). Definitions and perspectives on relational maintenance communication. In D. J. Canary & M. Dainton (Eds.), *Maintaining relationships through communication: Relational, contextual and cultural variations* (pp. 1–28). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

5. Guerrero, L. K., Andersen, P. A., & Afifi, W. A. (2014). *Close encounters: Communication in relationships* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

6. Vangelisti, A. L., & Huston, T. L. (1994). Maintaining marital satisfaction and love. In D. J. Canary & L. Stafford (Eds.), *Communication and relational maintenance* (pp. 165–186). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

7. Ibid.

8. Alberts, J. K., Yoshimura, C. G., Rabby, M., & Loschiavo, R. (2005). Mapping the topography of couples' daily conversation. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *22*, 299–322.

9. Haas, S. M., & Stafford, L. (2005). Maintenance behaviors in same-sex and marital relationships: A matched sample comparison. *Journal of Family Communication*, *5*, 43–60.

10. Koenig Kellas, J., & Trees, A. R. (2006). Finding meaning in difficult family experiences: Sense-making and interaction processes during joint family storytelling. *Journal of Family Communication*, *6*, 49–76.

11. Canary, D. J., & Stafford, L. (1994). Maintaining relationships through strategic and routine interaction. In D. J. Canary & L. Stafford (Eds.), *Communication and relational maintenance* (pp. 3–22). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

12. Stafford (2010); see also Stafford, L., & Canary, D. J. (1991). Maintenance strategies and romance relationship type, gender and relational characteristics. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *8*, 217–242.

13. Haas, S. M., & Stafford, L. (1998). An initial examination of maintenance behaviors in gay and lesbian relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *15*, 846–855.

14. Haas & Stafford (2005).

15. Gottman, J. M. (1999). *The marriage clinic: A scientifically based marital therapy*. New York: W. W. Norton.

16. Weigel, D. J., & Ballard-Reisch, D. S. (2001). The impact of relational maintenance behaviors on marital satisfaction: A longitudinal analysis. *Journal of Family Communication*, *1*, 265–279.

17. Weigel, D. J., & Ballard-Reisch, D. S. (2008). Relational maintenance, satisfaction, and commitment in marriages: An actor-partner analysis. *Journal of Family Communication*, *8*, 212–229.

18. Ragsdale, J. D., & Brandau-Brown, F. E. (2005). Individual differences in the use of relational maintenance strategies in marriage. *Journal of Family Communication*, *5*, 61–75.

19. Guerrero, L. K., & Bachman, G. F. (2006). Association among relational maintenance behaviors, attachment-style categories, and attachment dimensions. *Communication Studies*, *57*, 341–361.

20. Dainton, M., & Aylor, B. (2002). A relational uncertainty analysis of jealousy, trust, and maintenance in long-distance versus geographically close relationships. *Communication Quarterly*, *49*, 172–188.

21. Shellenbarger, S. (2005). *The breaking point: How female midlife crisis is transforming today's women*. New York: Henry Holt.

22. Koenig Kellas, J., LeClair-Underberg, C., & Lamb Normand, E. (2008). Stepfamily address terms: "Sometimes they mean something and sometimes they don't." *Journal of Family Communication*, *8*, 238–263.

23. Soliz, J. E., Lin, M., Anderson, K., & Harwood, J. (2006). Friends and allies: Communication in grandparent–grandchild relationships. In K. Floyd & M. T. Morman (Eds.), *Widening the family circle* (pp. 65–79). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

24. Stafford, L. (2013). Parent and sibling interactions during middle childhood. In A. L. Vangelisti (Ed.), *Handbook of family communication* (2nd ed., pp. 256–270). New York: Routledge.

25. Myers, S. A., & Members of COM 200 (2001). Relational maintenance behaviors in the sibling relationship. *Communication Quarterly*, *49*, 19–34.

26. Nicholson, J. H. (1999, November). *Sibling alliance rules*. Paper presented at the meeting of the National Communication Association, Chicago, IL.

27. Myers, S. A. (2008, November). *An investigation of relational maintenance across the adult sibling lifespan.* Paper presented at the meeting of the National Communication Association, San Diego, CA.

28. Myers, S. A., Brann, M., & Rittenour, C.E. (2008). Interpersonal communication motives as a predictor of early and middle adulthood siblings' use of relational maintenance behaviors. *Communication Research Reports*, *25*, 155–167.

29. p. 342 in Myers, S. A. (2011). Adult siblings' use of relational maintenance behaviors across the sibling lifespan. In K. M. Galvin (Ed.), *Making connections* (5th ed., pp. 334–352). New York: Oxford University Press.

30. Harwood, J. J., Rittenour, C. E., & Lin, M. C. (2013). Family communication in later life. In A. L. Vangelisti (Ed.), *Handbook of family communication* (2nd ed., pp. 112–126). New York: Routledge.

31. Schrodt, P., & Ledbetter, A. M. (2012). Parental confirmation as a mitigator of feeling caught and family satisfaction. *Personal Relationships*, *19*, 146–161.

32. Sieburg, E. (1973). *Interpersonal confirmation: A paradigm for conceptualization and measurement.* Paper presented at the meeting of the International Communication Association, Montreal, QC. (ERIC document no. ED 098 634 1975).

33. Canary, D. J., Cody, M. J., & Manusov, V. L. (2008). *Interpersonal communication: A goals-based approach* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's Press.

34. Stafford, L., & Dainton, M. (1994). The dark side of normal family interaction. In W. R. Cupach & B. Spitzberg (Eds.), *The dark side of interpersonal communication* (pp. 259–280). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

35. Hendrick, S. S., & Hendrick, C. (2006). Measuring respect in close relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *23*, 881–899.

36. Hendrick, S. S., Hendrick, C., & Logue, E. M. (2010). Respect and the family. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, *2*, 126–136.

37. p. 128 in Hendrick et al. (2010).

38. p. 464 in Pearson, J. C., Child, J. T., & Carmon, A. F. (2010). Rituals in committed romantic relationships: The creation and validation of an instrument. *Communication Studies*, *61*, 464–483.

39. Bruess, C. J., & Kudak, A. D. H. (2008a). *What happy couples do: The loving little rituals of romance.* Minneapolis, MN: Fairview Press.

40. pp. 262–263 in Baxter, L. A., & Braithwaite, D. O. (2006). Family rituals. In L. H. Turner & R. West (Eds.), *The family communication sourcebook* (pp. 259–280). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

41. Ibid.

42. Thompson, D. C., & Dickson, F. (1995, November). *Family rituals as communicative events: A grounded theory.* Paper presented at the meeting of the Speech Communication Association, San Antonio, TX.

43. Baxter & Braithwaite (2006); See also Wolin, S. J., & Bennett, L. A. (1984). Family rituals. *Family Process*, *23*, 401–420.

44. Crespo, C., Davide, I. N., Costa, M. E., & Fletcher, G. J. O. (2008). Family rituals in married couples: Links with attachment, relationship quality, and closeness. *Personal Relationships*, *15*, 191–203.

45. Bruess & Kudak (2008a).

46. Bruess, C. J., & Kudak, A. D. H. (2008b). *What happy parents do: The loving little rituals of a child-proof marriage.* Minneapolis, MN: Fairview Press.

47. Bruess, C. J., & Pearson, J. C. (1997). Interpersonal rituals in marriage and adult friendship. *Communication Monographs*, *66*, 25–46.

48. p. 35 in Bruess & Pearson (1997).

49. Gottman, J. M., & Silver, N. (1999). *The seven principles for making marriage work.* New York: Three Rivers Press.

50. Bruess & Kudak (2008b).

51. Alberts, J. K., Yoshimura, C. G., Rabby, M., & Loschiavo, R. (2005). Mapping the topography of couples' daily conversation. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *22*, 299–322.

52. Braithwaite, D. O., & Baxter, L. A. (1995). "I do" again: The relational dialectics of renewing marriage vows. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *12*, 177–198.

53. Baxter, L. A., & Braithwaite, D. O. (2002). Performing marriage: Marriage renewal rituals as cultural performance. *Southern Communication Journal*, *67*, 94–109.

54. Smit, R. (2011). Maintaining family memories through symbolic action: Young adults' perceptions of family rituals. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, *42*, 355–367.

55. Crespo et al. (2008).

56. Braithwaite, D. O., Baxter, L. A., & Harper, A. (1998). The role of rituals in the management of dialectical tensions of "old" and "new" in blended families. *Communication Studies*, *48*, 101–120.

57. Bryant, L. E. (2006). Ritual (in)activity in postbereaved stepfamilies. In L. H. Turner & R. West (Eds.), *The family communication sourcebook* (pp. 281–293). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

58. Braithwaite et al. (1998).

59. Moriarty, P. H., & Wagner, L. D. (2004). Family rituals that provide meaning for single-parent families. *Journal of Family Nursing*, *10*, 190–210.

60. Santos, S., Crespo, C., Silva, N., & Canavarro, M. C. (2012). Quality of life and adjustment in youths with asthma: The contributions of family rituals and the family environment. *Family Process*, *51*, 557–569.

61. Smit (2011).

62. Rolland, J. S. (2012). Mastering family challenges in serious illness and disability. In F. Walsh (Ed.), *Normal family processes: Growing diversity and complexity* (4th ed., pp. 452–482). New York: Guilford Press.

63. Trice, H. M., & Beyer, J. M. (1984). Studying organizational cultures through rites and ceremonies. *Academy of Management Review*, *9*, 653–669.

64. Kalmijn, M. (2004). Marriage rituals as reinforcers of role transitions: An analysis of weddings in the Netherlands. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *66*, 582–594.

65. p. 22 in Benoit, P. J., Kennedy, K. A., Waters, R., Hinton, S., Drew, S., & Daniels, F. (1996, November). *Food, football, and family talk: Thanksgiving rituals in families.* Paper presented at the meeting of the Speech Communication Association, San Diego, CA.

66. McGoldrick, M., & Carter, B. (2003). The family life cycle. In F. Walsh (Ed.), *Normal family processes: Growing diversity and complexity* (pp. 375–398). New York: Guilford Press.

67. Baxter & Braithwaite (2006).

68. Black, C. (2001). *It will never happen to me* (2nd ed.). Center City, MN: Hazelden.

69. Baxter, L. A., Braithwaite, D. O., Koenig Kellas, J., LeClair-Underberg, C., Lamb-Normand, E., Routsong, T., & Thatcher, M. (2009). Empty ritual: Young-adult stepchildren's perceptions of the remarriage ceremony. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *26*, 467–487.

70. Jacobson, N. S., & Gottman, J. M. (1998). *When men batter women: New insights into ending abusive relationships*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

71. Bruess, C. J. (1997). *Interview in family communication*. Teleclass, available from PBS Adult Learning Satellite Service, 1320 Braddock Pl., Alexandria, VA.

72. Villard, K., & Whipple, L. (1976). *Beginnings in relational communication*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

73. Chapman, G. (2004). *The five love languages: How to express heartfelt commitment to your mate*. Chicago, IL: Northfield Press.

74. Wilkinson, C. A., & Grill, L. H. (2011). Expressing affection: A vocabulary of loving messages. In J. M. Galvin (Ed.), *Making connections* (5th ed., pp. 164–173). New York: Oxford University Press.

75. McGoldrick, M., Giordano, J., & Garcia-Preto, N. (2005). *Ethnicity and family therapy* (3rd ed.). New York: Guilford Press.

76. McGoldrick, M. (2003). Culture: A challenge to concepts of normality. In F. Walsh (Ed.), *Normal family processes: Growing diversity and complexity* (3rd ed., pp. 235–259). New York: Guilford Press.

77. Johnson, S. (2008). *Hold me tight: Seven conversations for a lifetime of love*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown.

78. Petronio, S. (2002). *Boundaries of privacy: Dialectics of disclosure*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

79. Gottman, J. M., & DeClaire, J. (2001). *The relationship cure*. New York: Crown Publishers.

80. Denes, A., Dhillon, A., & Speer, A. C. (2017). Relational maintenance strategies during the post sex time interval. *Communication Quarterly*, *65*, 307–332.

81. Chapman (2004).

82. Shellenbarger, S. (2011, January 12). Teens take elders to tech boot camp. *Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved June 5, 2013 from http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB100 01424052748704515904576075763253410454

83. Lenhart, A. (2010, September 2). Cell phones and American adults. *Pew Internet Research Center*. Retrieved June 5, 2013 from http://pewinternet.org

84. Duckworth, J., & Buzzanell, P. (2009). Constructing work–life balance and fatherhood: Men's framing of the meanings of *both* work *and* family. *Communication Studies*, *60*, 558–573.

85. Fujishin, R. (2002). *Gifts from the heart* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.

86. p. 142 in Pipher, M. (1996). *The shelter of each other: Rebuilding our families*. New York: Ballantine Books.

87. Floyd, K., & Morman, M. T. (2005). Fathers' and sons' reports of fathers' affectionate communication: Implications of a naïve theory of affection. *Journal of Personal and Social Relationships*, *22*, 99–109.

88. Villard & Whipple (1976).

89. Floyd, K. (2006). *Communicating affection: Interpersonal behavior and social context*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

90. p. 28 in Helms, H. M., Hengstebeck, N. D., & Demo, D. H. (2017). Everyday hassles and family relationships. In C. A. Price, K. R. Bush, & S. P. Price (Eds.), *Families & change: Coping with stressful events and transitions* (pp. 27–49). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.