

CHAPTER 7

Communication and Family Roles and Types

CHAPTER PREVIEW

1. Specific Role Functions and Family Responsibilities
2. How Family Members Learn, Adjust, and Relinquish Family Roles
3. Communication in Different Types of Couples and Families

COMPETING PRIORITIES

Rebekah is a married mother of two children, ages four and two. Before her first child was born, she had begun a program as a doctoral student in communication at the state university. Both of her parents are professors at a college in a neighboring state and have always been very supportive and proud of their daughter following in their footsteps. Rebekah continued full-time in the program until her second child came along. Following her second child's birth, Rebekah decided she needed to reduce her studies to part-time until the kids got a little older, given her husband's busy work schedule. Rebekah recognized that she really didn't need to have a career to provide for her children because her husband made enough money to support the family. However, she had such a love of communication and felt a real desire to continue the program. She also wanted to be a role model for her daughter in pursuing her dreams. But even part-time has been difficult with Rebekah still taking on full responsibility for child care and managing the household, so she decided to discuss her concerns with her husband.

Now Rebekah is considering quitting the program altogether, but worries what her family will think of her, especially since she is so close to completion. She feels

conflicted about her responsibilities: “When I’m with the kids, I am always thinking about what I should be doing in my studies, and when I’m at school or studying, I always worry that I should be with the kids.”

SHE’S NOT MY MOTHER!

Jarvis is 46 and is a solo parent to his 12-year-old son, Jamal. Jamal’s mother left when he was just two years old, and Jarvis and Jamal have been on their own since then. Jarvis’s mother and sister live nearby and have helped as needed, but Jarvis has prided himself for being there for Jamal as much as he can. He has often felt stretched, wondering if he can provide everything Jamal needs. Jarvis is deeply religious, and he and Jamal attend weekly services at their local church. About a year ago, Jarvis began dating Sylvia, a woman he met at a church singles’ group. As their relationship has become more serious, he has slowly begun to include Sylvia in activities that were traditionally those that he and Jamal did together by themselves. Jamal initially was hesitant to include Sylvia, but over time, he has adjusted to having Sylvia take on a role in their family. Jarvis has been really grateful to have Sylvia around, as he was never good at what he calls the “touchy, feely stuff.” He thinks that Sylvia has a nice way of providing the emotional support for Jamal that he doesn’t provide very well. She has also encouraged Jamal to pursue his interest in music, often driving him to piano lessons—something that Jarvis was never able to do due to his busy work schedule.

More recently, Jarvis and Sylvia have been discussing marriage, and Jarvis intends to propose fairly soon. When he explained this to Jamal, he framed the news as “something wonderful”—Jamal was going to finally have a mother. Jarvis was surprised at Jamal’s intensely negative response: “She’s not my mother! And she never will be my mother!”

One of our goals in this book is to help you understand how communication creates and changes family systems in diverse ways. Although you may not be balancing the work demands of a doctoral program with family responsibilities like Rebekah, or figuring out how to introduce a potential new member to the family when one of your loved ones feels less welcoming, like Jarvis, you likely have seen and experienced moments in your own family when your roles and responsibilities have changed. How did you talk about those changes with other family members? What kinds of expectations did you and your family members have for your new role and responsibilities? And how were those expectations communicated and acted upon?

There is tremendous variability in communication across families as members interact with each other to create, sustain, and alter their role relationships. For instance, think about the different and complex ways that people use language to talk about family roles, including words such as *co-breadwinners*, *stay-at-home parent*,

noncustodial father, or *third mother-in-law*, all of which have implications for family interaction. Today, opinions differ widely about what it means to enact the roles of partner, mother, stepbrother, ex-sister-in-law, or foster daughter, to name a few. Within families, roles are established, grown into, grown through, discussed, negotiated, redefined, and accepted or rejected. As members mature and families adapt to changing circumstances, new roles may emerge, existing roles may change, or former roles may disappear. In order to understand role development, we need to consider role definitions, expectations, and performance. In this chapter, we will explore these complex role issues and their implications for family communication. First, we will define family roles and discuss how communication scholars view family roles through an interactional lens. Second, we will identify five essential family functions that serve as a basis for family roles before discussing how family roles are learned, adjusted, and relinquished through communication. Third, we will examine how communication functions in different types of couples and families.

To begin, we define **family roles** as recurring patterns of behavior developed through the social interactions that family members enact in order to fulfill family functions. From a communication perspective, roles develop as family members interact and create shared meanings and negotiate what behaviors to perform in order to sustain the family system. Thinking back to our opening scenario with Jarvis, for example, what might Sylvia's willingness to take Jamal to his piano lessons mean to Jarvis? What might it mean to Sylvia? And how might her encouragement of Jamal communicate her desire to be included in the family? This perspective contrasts with theories that present a fixed, or unchanging, view of roles based solely on biological, legal, or structural terms. Rather than take a fixed view, as communication scholars, we have adopted an interactional perspective, one that emphasizes how family roles and the behaviors used to enact them emerge through social interaction.

According to this perspective, roles emerge through family members' dialogue with each other, reflecting the transactional nature of communication. In essence, family roles are developed, maintained, and changed through communication. You likely learned how to assume your place within your family from the feedback provided by your other family members. When we were children, many of us received direct instructions about how to enact the roles of son or daughter in our respective families, or we may have modeled our behaviors from interactions we observed in others, or both. As adults, we tend to use our family of origin history as a base from which to negotiate mutual roles, such as partner or parent, whereas as children, we likely developed our roles through a combination of adult direction, family experiences, peer relationships, and societal and cultural norms.

Today, family roles are less tied to age because of increased longevity and more fluid life stages.¹ A 48-year-old female may parent a preschooler; a 21-year-old male may do the same. Family roles are also reciprocal in nature. For instance, you

cannot be a stepfather without a stepchild, or a wife without a husband; in fact, you cannot be a companionable father to a child who rejects you. Over time, family members negotiate their mutual expectations of one another, create predictable interaction patterns, and acquire or share role identifications such as provider or nurturer at different life stages. As circumstances change, or some hopes or expectations fade, members may relinquish certain roles.

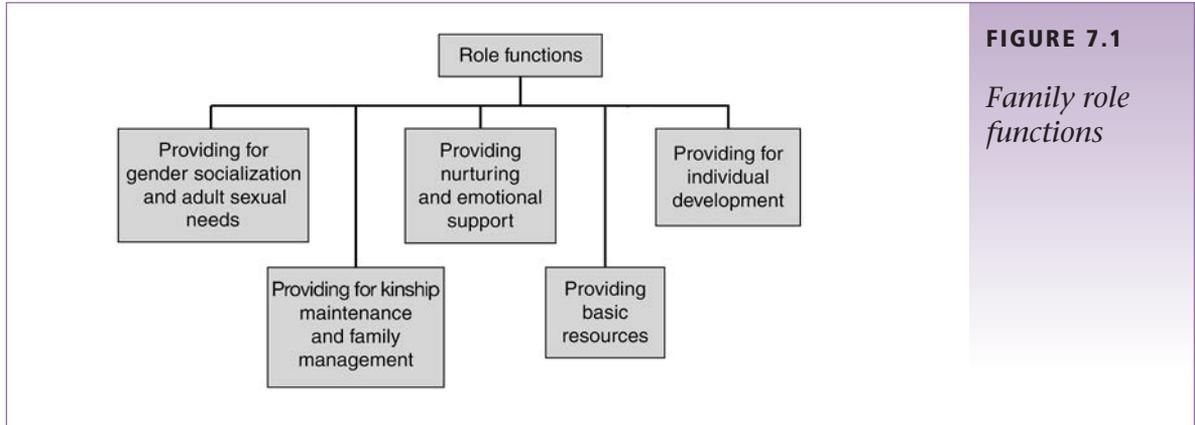
Consequently, an interactional approach to role development reflects: (a) the identity and cultural background and role models of a person who occupies a social position, such as oldest son or stepmother, (b) the relationships in which a person interacts, (c) the changes each family member experiences as he or she moves through the life cycle or encounters life crises, (d) the effects of each member's role performance on the family system, and (e) the extent to which a person's social/psychological identity is defined and enhanced by a particular role. For example, a woman's behavior in the role of spouse may have been very different in her first marriage than in her second, due to her own personal growth and the role enactment of each partner. Despite changes in her role as a spouse, however, her behaviors are likely to fulfill certain family functions that are needed to sustain the family system. With this idea in mind, let's turn our attention to specific role functions and responsibilities that are likely to exist in all families.

SPECIFIC ROLE FUNCTIONS AND FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES

To help us understand how family members communicate to accomplish a variety of tasks, scholars have developed the **McMaster model of family functioning**, a model that focuses on discovering how a family allocates and manages family responsibilities.² Specifically, this model describes five essential family functions that serve as a basis for family roles:

1. Providing for gender socialization and sexual needs.
2. Providing nurturing and emotional support.
3. Providing for individual development.
4. Providing for kinship maintenance and family management.
5. Providing basic resources.

These family functions can be categorized as instrumental (providing resources for the family), affective (providing support and nurturing care, fulfilling adult sexual needs), and mixed (providing life-skill development and system upkeep). When you look at Figure 7.1, imagine a mobile with the system's parts balanced by the multiple role functions operating within the family. These role functions become superimposed on the family system and its members.



Although most researchers to date who study family functions tend to presume two-parent households involving a male and female parent, same-sex partners with children face many similar issues as they confront daily family life,³ as do single parents, members of multigenerational households, and stepfamilies. With this in mind, let's examine each of the five functions more closely before discussing how family members adopt and enact particular roles to fulfill each function.

Providing for Gender Socialization and Sexual Needs

In a culture that provides multiple possibilities regarding gender roles, men and women frequently receive mixed messages about what it means to be masculine and feminine and a blurring of boundaries based on male and female binaries.⁴ When we think about the experiences of male and female roles in families, men may hear that a woman wants a man who is expressive, gentle, nurturing, and vulnerable, yet also successful, assertive, prosperous, and capable. Women may receive similarly conflicting messages about what men want and about how to be independent, yet connected in relationships. Despite these conflicting messages, male and female family roles reflect a co-mingling of social, cultural, and economic forces that impact family life.

The process of learning what it means to be male or female begins at birth. Think about all of the indirect and direct messages you received in this regard. Even as newborns, for example, males and females are handled differently as most babies receive "gender-appropriate" toys. By the time children reach kindergarten, researchers have found that most boys enact the masculine behaviors expected of them, and restrict their interests and activities to avoid what might be perceived as feminine. Similarly, most girls encounter feminine expectations, although society makes room for "tomboys." Family members teach children, both explicitly and

implicitly, what is “masculine” and what is “feminine” from their comments about play, exercise, weight, appearance, and dress.⁵ Whereas some religious and cultural traditions support strong distinctions between masculine and feminine behaviors, others find such gender-bound distinctions to be repressive with little correspondence to the lived experience of some family members today.

Although religious and cultural traditions influence how individuals learn their gender orientations, in families, gender socialization often involves same-sex guidance from a parental figure. When responding to questions about what it means to be a good son, for example, researchers have demonstrated that males consistently reference their fathers but not their mothers, suggesting that sons learn their own roles, specifically, and the role of fatherhood more generally, from male parents.⁶ Moreover, the gender-based communication directives and modeling you encountered during childhood tend to reappear when you become a parent unless you deliberately choose not to follow such expectations. Although men are typically thought to be less nurturing, less disclosive about themselves, and more secretive than women today, many men eschew preconceived notions about how they nurture their children, and communicate in supportive and caring ways with their children. In fact, men’s roles are becoming more flexible as adult partners renegotiate family roles and responsibilities, and as fathers become increasingly involved in raising their children.⁷ Nevertheless, the tension of embracing role flexibility in the

PHOTO 7.1

Role development involves observing and imitating role models



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face of cultural expectations of masculinity remains, as many married fathers who lose their jobs fight to retain their roles as “real men” in circumstances they view as emasculating. As communication scholars have demonstrated, these men will often cognitively reframe their situation in order to find ways to maintain a self-concept of “breadwinner” in their families.⁸

Further challenging gender-stereotyped roles in families are the ongoing efforts of communication scholars to document how disclosure, intimacy, and role behaviors differ between men and women. For example, Julia T. Wood and her colleagues have questioned the cultural privileging of openness and self-disclosure as the only paths to developing intimacy in family relationships.⁹ They argued that, because men’s self-disclosure does not reduce stress as much as it does for women, some men regard practical help, mutual assistance, and companionship as better benchmarks of caring and closeness. More recently, Wood suggested that women tend to develop and maintain closeness through personal self-disclosure, whereas men often develop and maintain closeness through shared activities.¹⁰ Traditionally, these differences in communication and in family role behaviors were observed in families headed by a heterosexual couple. Mothers shared more time with daughters in meal preparation and family care projects; fathers shared more time with sons in doing home and car repairs and yard work. Today, partners enact gender roles that work for their particular relationships. Due to the relative absence of marital role models, for example, same-sex couples must negotiate responsibilities rather than rely on societal expectations or previous gender role models. In same-sex couples, the division of household tasks tends to be more equitable than in heterosexual couples, with decisions about household labor made based upon the particular skills of each partner, their preferred interests, and perceived needs.¹¹

Ultimately, there are many factors that influence how couples enact gender roles, including cultural backgrounds, career demands, and individual expectations. With time, partners may develop more flexible roles through their ongoing experiences and interactions with each other as they communicate in response to the internal and external demands of family life. Consider, for example, the sentiments of one mother who wrote the following about her adult son:

I recently received an e-mail from my son that reminded me of how his marriage is so different from mine. He wrote about the meals he cooked for the family and taking the kids shopping for school clothes. This week he was the primary caregiver while his wife, Alyana, was in Los Angeles on business. She loves the outdoors, takes care of the lawn, and coaches the boys’ baseball team. Their lifestyle amazes me, and I love to see Brian act as such a caring and active parent to their two sons.

This mother came to realize that her son's relationship with his wife afforded both partners the opportunity to enact family roles that suited their personal and professional needs, rather than adhere to preconceived notions of what husbands and wives are supposed to do in marriage. Looking back at our opening scenarios, how might Rebekah discuss her concerns about finishing her degree while balancing her responsibilities at home with her husband? How might she and her husband renegotiate their roles so that she can have the necessary freedom and flexibility to complete her education? And how might Sylvia's enactment of motherly roles and responsibilities further strengthen her relationship with Jarvis, despite Jamal questioning her legitimacy as his "mother"?

As you can see in both of the scenarios we use to open this chapter, changes in family life have led to greater androgynous role enactment. Androgynous individuals possess qualities that culture defines as *both* masculine and feminine instead of belonging to one gender orientation over the other.¹² This affects role performance, as androgynous family members tend to evaluate who is responsible for enacting which role based on the abilities and needs of each family member. An androgynous person is flexible, adaptive, and capable of being both instrumental (assertive, competent, forceful, and independent) and expressive (nurturing, warm, supportive, and compassionate) depending on the demands of the situation. Many adult family members have become more androgynous as circumstances, such as a partner's military deployment, or a divorce, challenge the other partner to assume new role responsibilities.

Despite the many changes in family life that have occurred over the last two decades, we should carefully note that not everything changes so quickly in terms of gender **role expectations**, or the behaviors that family members anticipate masculine and feminine individuals will enact to fulfill family responsibilities. For example, young adult women are more likely than young adult men to receive advice from parents that they should stop work after having children and that they should make career choices that will accommodate family.¹³ Husbands who express desires to stay at home with children receive negative reactions as do wives and mothers who might need or want to take on a commuter role and be away from family for all or part of the week.¹⁴ Likewise, cultural and legal changes regarding marriage equality in the U.S. and increasing public discussion of transgender individuals raise issues for family identity and role expectations.¹⁵ Although family members may negotiate how to enact roles and fulfill responsibilities in a manner that works best for them, they do so within a larger social and societal network that has gender expectations of its own, as reflected in the following account of a professional woman who is also a wife and mother:

When my husband and I decided that I should accept a position overseas, we did so not knowing if he would be able to find suitable employment or if he would instead take on a stay-at-home parent role. Before we went, many friends and family asked

us what he was going to do there. I think that for many of them, the idea that a man would give up employment for his wife's professional opportunity was hard to believe.

Providing Nurturing and Emotional Support

The second family function that the McMaster model describes involves nurturing children and providing emotional support in times of stress and crisis. For many of us, family members provide a sense of mutual admiration, support, and reassurance that helps us cope with difficult circumstances. From a transactional perspective, your family's relational satisfaction is likely to increase when each member meets the needs and expectations of other family members. More importantly, children who are nurtured and supported by their parents, social networks, and community develop the capability to be nurturing and supportive themselves. With this in mind, let's briefly examine what it means to nurture children before discussing how families fulfill a responsibility to provide emotional support in times of need.

Nurturing Children Parents nurture their children when they communicate care and teach their children family values. Through advice, directives, answers to questions, and observations of other people's behaviors, children learn what parents and society expect of them. Until recently, mothers served as primary nurturers because they had far greater contact with their children than did fathers. This is still true in some families, but not to the same extent as in the past. For example, when looking at how fathers of preschool children communicatively construct their child-rearing behaviors, one study revealed a "masculine" concept of caregiving that reflected the increasing role of fathers as caretakers.¹⁶ Although historically, children typically perceived their fathers to be more distant, less empathetic, and less caring than their mothers, especially when it comes to verbal and nonverbal expressions of love, today, fathers spend more time with their children and have greater involvement than fathers did in the past.¹⁷

Despite some of the changes that have occurred in fathering over the last two decades, differences in how mothers and fathers nurture their children continue to exist, especially in certain contexts. For instance, mothers are typically the primary caregivers of children who have special needs. Likewise, fathers of children with mood disorders have more difficulty accepting the illness and have been less likely to participate in therapy efforts.¹⁸ In a comparison of parental stress when parenting school-aged children with disabilities, both mothers and fathers experienced similar levels of stress, although fathers reported more difficulty establishing an emotionally close relationship with the child.¹⁹

In addition to parents, adolescent and young adult siblings may also help nurture their younger siblings during middle childhood (ages 5 to 11), especially when they spend more time with their siblings than with their parents.²⁰ Consequently, many older siblings become important role models for younger siblings, for better or, occasionally, for worse. Regardless of which family member helps to nurture and socialize children, consistent with a transactional perspective to family communication, it is important for us to remember that the communication and behavior of adults influences children's development. At the same time, children's behavior can influence how parents (and at times, older siblings) enact their roles. When children resist the socialization messages of their parents, such resistance can frustrate parents and heighten family stress, especially when it occurs in a rigid family system.

Providing Support and Empathy Alongside nurturing children is the task of providing support and empathy to family members in times of need. In other words, an important responsibility of family members involves focusing on each other's needs, listening to each other's problems, and providing emotional support.²¹ An important skill in the provision of emotional support is empathic listening, as such listening provides the other with a sense of being understood and the opportunity to share pent-up feelings of rage, frustration, or exhaustion. Consider one child's description of how a father provided emotional support in the face of academic challenges at school:

My father's way is to be very calm and patient with his children. When he helped me with my homework, he would never leave until he knew I understood it completely. He would tell me how hard it was to deal with math and science assignments. Now when I explain something, I try to see that my children understand because I remember the good feelings that I had when I finally understood my homework.

As evidenced by this example, empathy conveys nonjudgmental understanding and concern for another. If the communication channels between family members encourage and permit the open expression of feelings, other family members can function therapeutically by listening empathically, offering advice, or questioning others to help them understand their own motives. These types of behavior, in turn, are likely to benefit children as they age into adolescence and young adulthood, and develop their own friendships and romantic relationships as adults. For instance, researchers have demonstrated that teens who report high levels of empathy from their parents report using more positive, pro-social behaviors themselves, such as communicating empathy, showing concern for others, and assisting others in times of need.²²

Providing for Individual Development

The third role function described in the McMaster model includes those tasks that each individual must fulfill in order to become self-sufficient. Over time, individuals must simultaneously develop their own uniqueness apart from others while maintaining a sense of commonality with others,²³ and they first begin to work this out in their interactions with family members. When young family members cannot accomplish the task of developing self-sufficiency, they can easily become overly dependent on the family system. A “take care of me” attitude on the part of any one family member diminishes the ability of the family system to accomplish this task.

Family members must interact in ways that facilitate each other’s opportunities for self-discovery and talent development. For example, one of your authors, Paul Schrodt, and his colleagues have demonstrated that children who perceive that their parents are competent communicators and that their family is conversation oriented are more likely to view themselves as competent communicators.²⁴ Parents perform the function of helping their children develop self-sufficiency during their children’s formative years, but from an early age, siblings also influence one another’s talents. Through their play with one another, siblings develop the communication strategies they need to assume future family roles. In essence, younger family members need messages that support or encourage individual decision-making, as the recognition of members’ ideas, arguments, and decisions creates a context for valuing independence.

Providing for Kinship Maintenance and Family Management

The fourth set of responsibilities described in the McMaster model involves maintaining relational ties and managing the daily lives and needs of all members. Let’s examine each one separately before we turn our attention to the final task described in the model: providing basic resources.

Kinship Maintenance One complex and often overlooked maintenance function involves managing and nurturing kinship ties within the extended family network. Kinship maintenance involves sharing in, participating in, and promoting the family’s welfare through managing contacts with biological and chosen kin who live outside the family home. These interactions to maintain families may be through living in the same household, visiting, or other face-to-face communication, or by mediated communication—for example, by phone, social media, text messaging, or in written form.

Essentially, kinkeeping involves keeping in touch with other family members and, in some cases, keeping members in touch with each other.²⁵ Family members who specialize in this behavior are called *kinkeepers* and their work in maintaining

family communication includes providing information and assistance, facilitating rituals, and continuing a previous kinkeeper's work of maintaining family relationships.²⁶ Researchers have found that women are more likely to play this role in families. For instance, aunts take on kinkeeping functions as they work to preserve and strengthen family bonds through activities such as facilitating rituals and maintaining communication, particularly long distance.²⁷ Women are also more likely to talk about genetic issues with extended family members²⁸ and to be the recipients of such information.²⁹

The kinship maintenance function directly involves and impacts family communication because "kin-work" is the labor that enables families to endure over time.³⁰ Whether one is included or excluded from family events or hears the latest family news signifies one's place within the family system. In earlier research, scholars found that kinkeepers, who are usually women, relied heavily on the telephone, yet today more family members use e-mail, social networking sites, and family members' blogs to create a "new connectedness."³¹ As one mother and wife explained:

I was very reluctant to join a social networking site. I was dragged on one kicking and screaming by my sister, but I have to say it's been a terrific tool for staying connected and reconnecting too. I love the playful exchanges and updates on all the little/regular things in daily life that really are our "lives." All of our family is far-flung so it's great to check in daily. An unexpected benefit has been improved communication with a few difficult family members, as it's the perfect tool for light-hearted interactions. It's also the perfect vehicle for me as I've never been a phone person.

In addition to the different communication channels that kinkeepers might use, family rituals, such as birthday or holiday celebrations, represent a special time for kin-related communication and family maintenance.³² In highly cohesive families, for example, attendance at get-togethers is mandatory and only illness or great distances are acceptable excuses. In other households, holidays may evoke feelings of sadness or conflict because estranged and/or divorced members are excluded. Members of families low in cohesion may envy the family celebrations of highly cohesive families. Stepfamilies must work to create their own rituals to provide members with a sense of identity even as some members may resist these attempts.³³ During the holidays, both women and men share the tasks of shopping, calling, visiting, buying gifts, and attending events, although women still send more greeting cards or letters.

Kinship ties are also affected by external factors, especially in nontraditional family forms. For instance, single-parent family systems encounter special kinship

opportunities and concerns, as single fathers are more likely than married fathers to share breakfast, home activities, and outings with their children. Likewise, in divorced families, there may be special challenges in communication with the ex-spouse and his or her new family. In stepfamilies, the ability to maintain relationships will be affected by the attitudes of step-grandparents and an ability to retain ties with biological paternal grandparents.³⁴ On occasion, children lose active contact with an entire side of their family heritage. Divorced parents and extended family members need to work to prevent children from becoming pawns and experiencing forced separations. Maintaining supportive contact on significant child-related matters benefits all parties—both parents and children.³⁵

Family kinship networking also varies according to family of origin and ethnicity. For example, Mexican men and women tend to have equally strong relationships with their relatives. However, Mexican men network more with other persons outside their families, whereas the women typically form their strongest relationship ties within their families.³⁶ In Chicano cultures, godparents (*padrinos*) link families and communities through friends or authorities. Although often not relatives, godparents and other honorary family members (e.g., an honorary aunt or uncle) play key roles in religious activities, such as first communion, confirmation, and marriage. They also provide nurturing and financial aid when needed, as a moral obligation.³⁷ Consider the following excerpt from one family member who no longer has immediate family with which to celebrate Christmas:

Since my immediate family is dead, and any other distant relatives on my husband's side or my side live thousands of miles away, we have worked at creating a local family. Over the years, we have developed close friends who serve as honorary aunts and uncles for the children. The highlight of our Christmas is our annual dinner when we all get together to decorate the tree and the children get to see the people they refer to as Uncle Matt and Aunt Mandy within a family context. I feel closer to these people than to many of my blood relatives.

As we hope you can see from this example and others, kinkeeping practices represent a special way to communicate the importance of family. In this age in which relatives are spread across miles and continents, kinkeeping takes on greater meaning. When family members feel comfortable sharing their problems, joys, and family celebrations, they reap the benefits of the kinship function.

Management of Daily Needs In addition to kinkeeping and relational maintenance, families also share responsibilities to help meet the daily needs of each family member, including decision-making to facilitate housekeeping, child care, recreation, and the management of family finances. In dual-earner partnerships,

men tend to spend more time than their wives working outside the home, whereas women do more work inside the home.³⁸ Trends over the past three decades reveal that women's increased earning power is associated with men participating more in child care, cooking, and cleaning.³⁹ Of course, how partners negotiate the division of household chores can become a frequent source of conflict. In the case of married couples, for example, both husbands and wives tend to see the division of household chores as less fair to wives who tend to perform a greater amount of housework, regardless of the presence of children or the woman's employment status.⁴⁰ In marriages where wives and husbands were both employed full-time, however, researchers have found that the gap between the amount of housework wives and husbands performed was smaller than when wives worked part-time or not at all.⁴¹

Ongoing changes in home maintenance reflect active negotiation between partners, since most are creating a housekeeping system different from that in their families of origin. In fact, a frequent and important negotiation task of cohabiting or married partners involves coordinating duties and responsibilities with each other, with 40% of couples reporting that they negotiate these details daily and 26% indicating that such negotiations occur two to three times a week.⁴² In commuter marriages, where spouses do not share a residence all of the time, this negotiation process can become even more complicated. For example, communication scholar Karla Bergen and her colleagues found that, although commuting wives were resisting cultural expectations by pursuing their own careers, they experienced traditional gendered expectations from their husbands for housework and other family roles, as wives reported needing to remind or nag their husbands to complete tasks at home.⁴³ Likewise, changes in family structure, such as divorce, may also force a redefinition of roles tied to daily routines.⁴⁴

Finally, family members not only negotiate the daily care of the family and the completion of household chores and activities, but they also engage in recreation management, which involves coordinating those things that family members do for relaxation, entertainment, or personal development. Whereas athletic activities increasingly involve both genders, other activities may appeal to different ages or genders. Extremely cohesive families encourage much group recreational activity, whereas less cohesive families do not. Importantly, parents not only model to their children what is appropriate recreational behavior, but at times, they can create unnecessary tension and conflict if their children fail to meet their expectations in recreational activities.

Providing Basic Resources

The final responsibility discussed in the McMaster model of family functioning involves providing basic resources to family members. Traditionally, men served as the major financial providers in families, although there have always been

exceptions, especially for African American women who have traditionally worked outside the home to contribute to the economic resources of the family.⁴⁵ However, the task of providing basic resources no longer remains a gendered expectation. In fact, in 40% of households with children under the age of 18, women are either the sole or the primary source of income.⁴⁶ Of these “breadwinner moms,” 37% are married and 63% are single mothers. When studying how family members provide basic resources, some scholars distinguish between *dual-career* couples and *dual-earner* couples. A **dual-career couple** refers to a partnership in which each person pursues a full-time career and expects to advance up the career ladder. In a **dual-earner couple**, both partners are employed, but one or both of the partners work in the labor market in careers that do not offer a career ladder or the promise of professional advancement.⁴⁷ Some couples represent a blend of these types, as traditionally, some women would earn extra income for their family rather than pursue careers. Obviously, this has changed quite a bit in contemporary families and the number of dual-career couples has increased.

Not surprisingly, the current economic climate and a growing cultural acceptance of both parents acting as caregivers and earners have led to stressful lifestyles. Negotiating these roles is complicated and often unsatisfactory.⁴⁸ In most families today, neither parent stays at home all day, so there are challenges to finding time to prepare dinner, be home when the children arrive home from school, or deal with other practical aspects of daily family life, such as accepting a package or getting the refrigerator repaired. Families face the challenge of trying to oversee their latchkey children from afar and worry about what their teenagers are doing after school. As a result, parents have become increasingly reliant on technology, as children check in via their cell phones and as some parents use video cameras to make sure that their children are home and safe.

Merging the roles of provider/worker and family member creates **spillover**—the process that occurs when responsibilities from one domain of life (e.g., work) carry over into another domain of life (e.g., family). Spillover is bidirectional; family demands can spill over into work life and work demands can spill over into family life. A parent of two elementary school-aged children experiences spillover of family responsibilities into work. For example, if one child is sick and needs to be kept home from school, a parent must stay home from work to care for the child, perhaps videoconferencing in to an important meeting. The same parent also experiences her work demands spilling over into her family life when she gets online to complete some work while her children watch a movie. These challenges increase for single parents who do not have a partner to help cover these different responsibilities.

Work–family conflict and spillover may be even more of a challenge for low-income, unmarried parents, especially for single mothers. Of these women, those who report high levels of work–family conflict are less likely to be employed. In fact, work–family conflict may keep these women unemployed, or if they find

jobs, make it difficult for them to maintain employment stability or advance in their careers.⁴⁹

One of the more important conclusions to emerge from research on spillover is the tension and stress it can create. For example, some scholars have found that men experience stress as they struggle to balance competing demands across professional, marital, and parental roles.⁵⁰ Likewise, the same roles and stresses exist in women's lives, as illustrated by the competing demands that Rebekah experienced in the case study at the beginning of this chapter.⁵¹ Although both men and women are equally likely to experience tension and stress from competing work and family demands, how the tension is experienced is likely to change over the course of the family life cycle. Some scholars have demonstrated, for instance, that older adults (i.e., over age 50) are more likely to report home-to-work spillover involving care for elderly parents, whereas younger to middle-aged adults are more likely to report spillover focused on caring for children at home.⁵² Despite this generational difference, however, family members of all ages have reported more negative work-to-home spillover than home-to-work spillover.

Effective communication is critical to managing multiple role identities. When we adopt an interactional perspective to family roles, we see that couples interact and create shared meanings for their roles as providers and caregivers through their communicative practices.⁵³ Typically, most men and women are sitting down at their kitchen tables to coordinate their family's schedules, duties, and responsibilities (e.g., child care and elder care) at least two to three times a week.⁵⁴ Family members then attempt to manage family-to-work stress through specific workplace strategies. For instance, researchers have identified a variety of communication strategies that mothers use to manage family spillover into the workplace, including venting with superiors and/or with coworkers, receiving affirmation and assurances from coworkers, seeking advice from coworkers, and seeking instrumental (practical) support from supervisors, among others.⁵⁵ Organizations are increasingly responding to worker requests for telecommuting—working from home part- or full-time—and are documenting benefits of increased worker satisfaction and reduced turnover.⁵⁶

In addition to communication strategies and behaviors, family form may also impact members' abilities to manage work-family stress. In single-parent families, for example, providing economic stability is a primary task associated with the parenting role, as single mothers report struggling with decreased economic resources, longer work hours, and more limited social support.⁵⁷ Although many divorced fathers view providing economic support for their children as a significant and continuing role,⁵⁸ in stepfamilies, some stepparents believe that they have lost control of financial or time resources that go toward their stepchildren. Clearly, the provision of basic resources involves an ongoing process of role negotiation and strain as family members navigate both the internal expectations of other family members and the external circumstances that alter the social and economic climate of the family. As one father concluded:

There are times when I feel like a banker rather than some version of a father and husband. I spend much of my time talking or arguing with my two ex-wives, and my current wife, about finances because each "ex" expects that I should provide more tuition money for the two children who are college students and pay a larger share of my oldest daughter's wedding. This leads to painful conversations with my new wife who wants us to plan trips to China and Eastern Europe. All I want to do is find time and money to play golf once a week!

Families Often Combine All Five Functions

Although we have devoted quite a bit of time to discussing McMaster's model of the five functions that families seek to fulfill, depending on their circumstances, most families combine these five role functions in unique ways. You can reflect on how your family of origin managed these five functions. You may also be currently experiencing or will experience the need to consider how you will address these functions in your own life and family, depending on circumstances that you create or that befall your life. If both spouses are highly successful in their careers, for example, they may devote money and time to recreation and travel. Housekeeping functions may be provided by a cleaning service, and in highly affluent families, children may be socialized more so by professional caretakers (e.g., nannies) than by the parents themselves. On the other hand, parents who face more modest economic means or single parents will more likely face economic stresses, neighborhood safety concerns, and a need to rely on extended family members for child-care assistance. Parents may emphasize the therapeutic and provider roles,⁵⁹ depending on the needs of their children. In some families, recreation may be more individually oriented, such as having a gym membership, and kinship functions may receive limited attention. In some single-parent or dual-earner families, children may take on responsibilities such as sibling supervision or meal preparation, and as they age, they may be expected to provide therapeutic listening that would be expected of a parent. Regardless of how individual members combine different family responsibilities, at the center of it all is the communication process by which different family members negotiate and enact their respective roles. Let's briefly discuss how family members develop role expectations before we turn our attention to how members negotiate and enact family roles.

HOW FAMILY MEMBERS LEARN, ADJUST, AND RELINQUISH FAMILY ROLES

Now that we have a better understanding of family functions and role responsibilities, an important question remains: How do family members learn, demonstrate,

adjust, or relinquish these role functions? To answer this question, we will more closely examine what family scholars refer to as *role appropriation*, a three-part, overlapping process involving role expectations, role enactments, and role negotiations.⁶⁰

Role Expectations

Role expectations refer to the models and norms that a society provides for how certain family roles should be enacted. Walk into any bookstore or look on a parenting website and you will see material on how to be a good parent, partner, grandparent, or stepparent. The media features many family role models through television specials, situation comedies, movies, or talk shows. Daily life within a community also serves as a source of role expectations. When you were growing up, the neighbors and your friends probably all thought they knew who were the “good” mothers or the “bad” kids on the block or in the community. Religious and educational organizational cultures and school leaders also set expectations for how family members should behave. Each of you has grown up with expectations for how people should function in family roles, just as the following example shows:

My mother grew up on a ranch in the Great Uinta Basin in Utah. The women in her family were extremely strong and used to doing “men’s work.” Again, whatever had to be done would be done by whoever was available. It didn’t matter whether one was a girl or boy—all hands were necessary and looked upon as being equal in her family.

Cultural groups convey beliefs about parenting or spousal roles, which are learned by members of their community. In the Jewish tradition, for example, the role of mother is associated with the transmission of culture and primary values; as such, it carries a particular significance and implies certain expectations.⁶¹ Historically, African American women have worked outside the home, often as the sole or major breadwinner in order to support their families.⁶² **Familism**, or the subordination of the personal interests and goals of an individual to the values and demands of the family, dominates life in many Latino families who value family commitment and unity. Familism can create stresses in families—for example, staying in a difficult marriage to keep the family together.⁶³ In one example, a scholar studying Puerto Rican families found that women are gaining personal power by contributing financially to the household, although men may suffer some loss in status if their wives work.⁶⁴

In addition, role expectations also arise from significant others and complementary others. **Significant others** are those persons you view as important and who provide you with models from which you develop role expectations. In addition

to family members, a favorite teacher who combined a career with a family may influence your role choices. Thus, part of learning roles occurs by observing and imitating role models— persons whose behavior serves as a guide for others.

Complementary others are individuals who fulfill reciprocal role functions. During the later stages of romantic relationships, couples may spend long periods of time discussing their expectations for a future spouse, looking for a partner who will fulfill different needs in family life—for example, “I want my partner to be home with the children until they go to school” or “I need a partner who will help parent my children from my first marriage.” A future stepparent may try to explore expectations with a future older stepchild; a parent and college-aged child may discuss expectations for their interaction during summer vacations.

When one parent dies or leaves the family, the other parent may expect a child to fulfill an emotional role of confidant or a task role of household helper. “You’re the man of the house now” typifies this lowering of boundaries between parent and child subsystems, often resulting in misunderstandings and/or tensions among different family members. Frequently, such an expectation places great pressure on the child, alienates the child from other siblings, and eventually interferes with the normal process of separating from the family at the appropriate developmental period.

Additional role expectations arise from each person’s experiences and self-understanding. You may find that you wish to be a certain kind of partner or parent



Monkey Business Images/iStockphoto.com

PHOTO 7.2

Dual-career families face constant role negotiation

who is similar or different than what you experienced in your own family. Sometimes one's role expectations clash with those of significant others, as illustrated by this man's interactions with his parents and his in-laws:

Colleen and I have disagreements with our parents. They expect us to produce grandchildren, but neither of us wants the responsibility of children. It has taken each of us over a decade to finish our educations by paying for it on our own and working full-time. We love our dog, but that doesn't guarantee we would be nurturing parents!

Finally, role expectations reflect an imagined view of yourself—the way you like to think about your own actions and self-presentation, or what you believe you should be like in your life. For example, a father may imagine himself telling his child about the facts of life. A teenager may imagine lecturing a younger sibling on avoiding drug use. Such imaginings are not just daydreams; they serve as a rehearsal for actual performance. How we actually communicate in families may be influenced by how we imagine and believe we should or will be. No matter what you imagine, your thoughts and feelings about your role in the family represent expectations—that is, until you enact your role with significant others.

Role Enactment

Role enactment describes all of the communication behaviors an individual uses to perform a role. As with role expectations, role performance reflects the individual's capacity for enacting the role. Persons in complementary or opposing roles impact your role performance. Have you ever tried to reason with a parent who sulks, pamper an independent grandparent, or correct a willful child? However, if two complementary family members perceive things in similar ways, it enhances role performance. Young adults living with their parents may believe that they should no longer be subject to curfews and notifying parents of their evening plans; this belief will be reinforced by parents who no longer ask for them to account for their whereabouts. If a mother's advice to her adult son and his wife about caring for their sick infant is appreciated and followed, the mother will likely continue to give such advice. Thus, the way others assume their roles and comment on your role affects how you enact your role.

Additionally, your background influences your behavior. For example, if certain communication behaviors are not part of your experiences or repertoire, they cannot magically appear in a particular situation. A father may wish he could talk with his son instead of yelling at him or giving orders, but he may have little experience communicating this way and may feel incompetent when discussing

controversial subjects with his child. Self-confidence in attempting to fulfill a role also affects behavior. An inexperienced stepmother may not feel confident to express affection, either verbally or nonverbally, with her new stepchildren for many months or longer, especially when the stepfamily experiences struggles adjusting to their new circumstances. On occasion, people discover that they can function well in a role they did not expect or desire, as this woman discovered:

I was really furious when my husband quit his sales job to finish his degree. I didn't choose the role of provider and I didn't like being conscripted into it. But after a while, I got to feeling very professional and adult. Here I was supporting myself and a husband. I didn't know I had it in me.

When trying to enact both work roles and family roles, partners' experiences may be somewhat different. Among a predominantly working-class population, women's sense of balance between their work and family roles depends, at least partially, on their gender ideology. Women who enact a more traditional gender ideology perceive more balance in their roles than women who hold less traditional gender ideologies, but men's gender ideology does not affect their sense of balance between work and family roles.⁶⁵ Some men attempt to enact both work and family fully, resulting in the "superdad" role. In a study of male science and technology workers in Silicon Valley, one researcher found that "super-dads" attended to both the emotional and physical needs of their families while simultaneously investing heavily in their work, whereas other male colleagues remained in the traditional male role or chose to invest more in work when work-family pressures arose.⁶⁶ Today, an increasing number of gay male partners have chosen to become parents. Because this option became available only relatively recently, those in the first generation of partnered, "intentional" fathers have few role models.⁶⁷ Therefore, these men are faced with the communicative task of negotiating their roles as partners and parents, as they create a newer family form.

Choosing to enact one role may affect a person's ability to assume other roles as well. When comparing how highly educated women and men enact roles in their personal and professional lives, for example, one researcher found that more women in the top 10% of earning power were childless at age 40, most by choice. Instead, enacting the very demanding role of a consultant, lawyer, doctor, or other professional left these women with very little time to pursue romantic relationships. In other instances, women chose not to become mothers after realizing the difficulty of a double bind of being told they can be anything they want in life and also the impossibility of having it all.⁶⁸ For male professionals, the opposite is often true. The more successful they are in their careers, the more likely they are to be married with children.⁶⁹ Despite these differences, however, some professional women, such

as Sheryl Sandberg, the Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, have attempted to publicly debunk such perceptions. Specifically, Sandberg cited a study of female CEOs of Fortune 500 companies that indicated that 92.8% of the female CEOs were married.⁷⁰

Looking back at the “Competing Priorities” case study we used to open this chapter, how might Rebekah’s decision about her graduate degree be influenced by her desires to enact competing roles? How might her expectations and her family’s expectations of what it means to be a “mother,” a “wife,” and a “graduate student” influence how she thinks about and talks about her family responsibilities? Frequently, family members hold different perceptions of how other family members enact certain roles. For example, communication scholar Alan Mikkelsen asked fathers to report their time spent and emotional involvement with their children. Their children’s mothers (whether or not they were married to the fathers) were also asked to report on the father’s involvement and emotional involvement with their children. Fathers reported spending 17.6% more time with their children than the mothers estimated. Consequently, how family members enact their roles to fulfill family responsibilities is likely to vary as a result of different family members’ perceptions and expectations.

Role Negotiation

Effective role enactment involves communication and negotiating agreement among those in related roles. To achieve agreement on enacting complementary roles, family members engage in **role negotiation**, a process whereby they interact and socially construct and structure their reality and give meaning to their roles (as we discussed in Chapter 2). In describing the transition to parenthood, communication scholar Glen Stamp found that, when couples become parents, they need to interact and negotiate both parents’ expectations and develop identities and roles that will function well in this new stage of life.⁷¹ This critical use of communication applies to assuming and maintaining any family role. Thinking back to the case of Jarvis and his son Jamal at the beginning of this chapter, we see how bringing a new family member into the system requires role negotiation.

The role enactment process involves implicit or explicit negotiations with those family members in related roles. Discussions may involve reconstructing differences and exploring new ways to act regarding certain expectations, sometimes through direct confrontation or through experimentation and adjustments to discover how the other reacts to a new role behavior. For instance, becoming a new mother is associated with increased housework and more disagreements with spouses as compared to wives without children, although such increases in housework and spousal disagreements often do not hold true for husbands.⁷² In same-sex couples, some gay male parents have reported being free of gender role expectations, which gives them greater flexibility in choosing responsibilities or allowing responsibilities

to evolve based on personality and parenting preferences.⁷³ Finally, an individual's roles need to be integrated with other members' roles. Occasionally, family members must integrate the sometimes-conflicting roles of parent, partner, daughter, aunt, grandmother, and friend, all with their own expectations and demands and need for change at different life stages.

Frequently, role negotiation involves managing conflict. Individual family members may know what is expected of them, but some persons may not enact those expected behaviors. For example, a husband and wife may have agreed early in their marriage to share the provider role. However, after having a child, the wife may decide that she prefers instead to stay home with the baby. When this kind of change occurs, it requires adjustment in the family system and a new style of interdependence between partners must be negotiated. When faced with transitions or stresses, family members often have to renegotiate their previously predictable agreement.⁷⁴ In one study of 90 low-income noncustodial fathers, half of whom had been imprisoned and half of whom had criminal histories, researchers found that fathers with damaged family bonds before imprisonment used prison time as an opportunity to turn their lives around and reconnect with their children—a complicated process of role renegotiation.⁷⁵

Clearly, the potential for role conflict exists; in many cases, multiple role conflicts occur simultaneously. **Role conflict** occurs when competing demands are made on an individual in the fulfillment of his or her multiple social roles. When complementary or significant others have different expectations of another's role performance, conflict results. For example, an adult son who has moved to a different country may argue with his mother about how frequently he should e-mail, Skype, or return home to visit. Likewise, role conflict frequently occurs when a divorced parent remarries, bringing a stepparent into the family system, as there is a lack of clear and institutionalized roles for stepfamily members.⁷⁶ One study of successful stepmothers found that role ambiguities and role conflicts were a common experience in the early years as they tried to figure out their different role functions, such as nurturing, protecting, coordinating, and disciplining children.⁷⁷ Stepmothers overcame some conflicts if they had an accepting attitude, worked to resolve conflicts, and established good support systems.

Role conflict also occurs when a family member tries to enact two roles simultaneously that are incompatible or are difficult to enact together, such as in the example of Rebekah at the beginning of the chapter. You may have experienced examples of role conflict in your own family. For instance, a 14-year-old boy who finds out that his 17-year-old sister is sneaking out of the house at night might experience role conflict between his role as the dependable son, who would tell his parents that something potentially dangerous was happening, and his role as a sibling who wants his sister's approval. Frequently, grandparents who, by necessity, assume parental roles experience role conflict, and most report support groups as beneficial in managing these role conflicts.⁷⁸ Family communication is especially

important when role conflicts occur, as family members will need to work out how to best address these conflicts. Although family members may be able to resolve role conflicts by agreeing to change certain behaviors or expectations, it is important to understand that sometimes the best people can do is manage the tensions associated with the conflicts. For example, a daughter-in-law and mother-in-law may find ways to work out their respective roles in the family and learn to live with some role conflicts that they cannot resolve.⁷⁹

It is not unusual for role conflicts to emerge from the work–life balance issues that arise in most households. For instance, researchers coined the term “the second shift” to describe how married women often work at taking care of the house and children after putting in a full day’s work on the job.⁸⁰ Over the ensuing decades, most committed partnerships struggled with a variation of this issue. For example, the schedule of parents’ work may impact family functioning, as one study of Canadian families found that parents who worked evenings, nights, and weekends were less effective parents and experienced poorer family functioning than parents who worked standard weekday hours.⁸¹

To further understand the factors that influence role conflict, Sue Campbell Clark, an organizational behavior scholar, developed work–family border theory to explain how and why conflict between work and family roles increases or decreases. In her theory, she proposes that when the domains of work and home have similar cultures and weak borders, it is easier to flow back and forth between them, causing less conflict.⁸² For instance, a parent’s ability to bring work home when a child is ill, and also to work at the office on the weekend, if needed, indicates weak borders between home and work, which can be an advantage at times. However, in cases where one domain has a strong border and the other has a weak border, work–family balance favors the domain with which a person identifies most strongly. Imagine a woman who identifies primarily as a mother, but works in a field with a very strong border, such as a television producer. To illustrate further, this theory helps us understand that the wife and mother in the following excerpt is experiencing more challenges with work–family balance than her partner:

As the wife of a trial lawyer with a national firm, I ended up with a great number of child-care responsibilities even as I tried to achieve tenure at my college. He left the house before six in the morning so, if one of my young twin children woke up feeling sick, I had to find him in order to teach my classes.

As you will read in later chapters, predictable and unpredictable life crises also affect the roles you assume and how you function in them. Unforeseen circumstances may alter life in such a way that roles change drastically from those we planned or enacted. For example, a woman who is childless by choice may find this choice

challenged at the serious illness of a sister and becoming guardian to the sister's children. In some cases, state or federal policy determines how roles may be enacted. For example, the Family and Medical Leave Act, signed into law in 1993, requires U.S. large employers and public agencies to provide up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave for the birth or adoption of a child, making it more possible to develop the role of mother. It is important to note that most other countries have more flexible parental leave policies and better support than does the U.S. at present.⁸³

In the end, mature and functional families come to understand how family communication functions to create, enact, and change family roles. They prioritize setting aside time to discuss and try to come to agreement on their roles and expectations. Just setting aside time to talk about the day can be important for couples, as researchers have found that couples who take time to debrief and share work experiences greatly increase their relational satisfaction.⁸⁴ Like everything else in families, roles are dynamic and continually shift over time. Role conflict can be heightened when individuals enact roles in ways that are inflexible and ill-equipped to help couples and families adapt to changing life circumstances, making clear the important role of communication in developing functional and healthy role structures in family systems. Now that we have examined the primary tasks and responsibilities that families seek to fulfill, as well as the role appropriation process that individual members experience, let's turn our attention to typologies that function as common conceptual tools that communication scholars use to describe different forms of couple and family functioning.

COMMUNICATION IN DIFFERENT TYPES OF COUPLES AND FAMILIES

Couple and family typologies represent another way to explore how roles develop through family interaction. Many family researchers and therapists believe that family behavior and organization can be classified into various typologies, depending on structural features of families and/or the behavior patterns of family members. Typologies are useful to researchers and students of family communication because they help bring order to phenomena studied in family communication. In this final section, we will discuss three typologies of couples based on marital and gender ideologies, as well as cohabitation status. We will then conclude this chapter with a brief discussion of two family typologies that were developed using measures of family interaction.

Couple-Oriented Typologies

Fitzpatrick's Couple Types Mary Anne Fitzpatrick and her colleagues have developed what is considered by many communication scholars to be the most widely recognized typology of marital couples.⁸⁵ In her early work, Fitzpatrick explored a

variety of communication behaviors and relational dynamics to find out which behaviors and relational patterns made a difference in maintaining couple relationships. She identified eight meaningful factors that affect role enactment within marital relationships: (a) conflict avoidance, (b) assertiveness, (c) sharing, (d) the ideology of traditionalism, (e) the ideology of uncertainty and change, (f) temporal (time) regularity, (g) undifferentiated space, and (h) autonomy. After assessing these eight dimensions using a sample of nearly 1,000 married couples, Fitzpatrick identified three couple types: *traditionals*, *separates*, and *independents*. Whereas “pure” couple types included a husband and wife who both identified as having the same marital ideology (e.g., both identifying as independents or traditionals), “mixed” couple types included a husband and wife who described their relationship differently (e.g., an independent wife and a separate husband). Based on this distinction, Fitzpatrick found that 20% of her sample included pure traditionals, 17% were pure separates, and 22% were pure independents. All told, about 60% of her sample could be classified as pure types and 40% as mixed, with the most common mixed marriage including a traditional wife and a separate husband.⁸⁶ As you read descriptions of each couple type below, think about how couples you know fit into her typology.

Independent couples accept uncertainty and change. They pay limited attention to schedules and traditional values. Independents represent the most autonomous of the types but do considerable sharing and negotiate autonomy. Independents are more likely to report interpersonal conflict than the other two types given their desires to negotiate daily household chores and activities, and they support androgynous, flexible sex roles within their relationship.

Separate couples differ from independents by avoiding conflict more regularly, desiring more differentiated space, craving fairly regular schedules, and sharing less. In their personal and social relationships, separates maintain a distance from people, even their spouses. They experience little sense of togetherness or autonomy, and they usually oppose an androgynous gender orientation.

Traditional couples uphold a fairly conventional belief system and resist change or uncertainty because it threatens their routines. This leads to a high degree of interdependence and relatively low levels of autonomy. They will engage in conflict when necessary, but would rather avoid it. Traditionals, like separates, demonstrate strong sex-typed roles and oppose an androgynous orientation.⁸⁷

The six mixed types of couples can be identified by creating different combinations of the three pure label types: traditional/separate, separate/traditional, independent/separate, separate/independent, traditional/independent, and independent/traditional. These are not a category of “leftovers,” but represent many different couple

systems that continue to evolve and change over time.⁸⁸ In the separate/traditional category, for example, couples had low consensus on a number of relational issues, but they were moderately cohesive. These couples claimed high satisfaction for their relationship and outwardly expressed much affection.⁸⁹ More recently, researchers have continued using the couple types in empirical research. For example, separate couples score lowest on commitment, dedication, and satisfaction among the couple types.⁹⁰ Although researchers have indicated that traditional couples tend to be the most satisfied, followed in succession by mixed couples (i.e., traditional husband/separate wife), independents, and separates, they have also maintained that each couple type has the potential to create a satisfactory marriage.⁹¹

Table 7.1 summarizes the ways in which couple types have responded to a variety of relationship measures, including sex roles and gender perceptions. In predicting communication, you might expect that traditional families would demonstrate affection and sharing of the role functions discussed earlier in this chapter, with males and females remaining in defined positions. You could expect male dominance in attitudes and values regarding the providing, recreational, housekeeping, sex, and kinship functions, since the traditional type resists change. Because independents are more open to change, they might be more open to dual-career marriages and sharing the providing and housekeeping functions. Because independents value autonomy and avoid interdependence, individual partners may be freer in their role functions.

Understanding the different couple types is helpful for thinking about the potential problems that may occur when communicating about role functions. This is especially true for the separates who have not addressed, or cared to address, the

TABLE 7.1 Couple Type Differences on Relational Measures

<i>Couple Types</i>	<i>Marital Satisfaction</i>	<i>Cohesion</i>	<i>Consensus</i>	<i>Affectional Expression</i>	<i>Sex Roles</i>	<i>Psychological Gender States (Wives Only)</i>
Traditionals	High	High	High	Moderately high	Conventional	Feminine
Independents	Low	Moderately high	Low	Low	Nonconventional	Sex-typed androgynous
Separates	Low	Low	Moderately high	Low	Conventional	Feminine sex-typed
Separates/traditionals	Moderately high	Moderately high	Moderately high	High	Conventional	Feminine sex-typed
Other mixed types	Moderately high	Low	Low	Moderately high	Depends on mixed type	Depends on mixed type

interdependence/autonomy issue in their marriage. Fitzpatrick uses the label “emotionally divorced” for this type, because separates are least likely to express their feelings to their partners. In her explorations of dialectical theory, communication theorist Leslie Baxter has argued that Fitzpatrick’s traditionals privilege continuity over discontinuity, with independents privileging change over continuity, and separates somewhere in the middle.

Although Fitzpatrick’s marital typology has more than 40 years of empirical research to back it up, it is not the only attempt that family scholars have made to understand how different couples communicate to maintain satisfying and healthy relationships. In fact, scholars have recently given greater attention to different

FAMILY MATTERS: COMMUNICATION, CONFLICT, AND SATISFACTION AMONG DIFFERENT TYPES OF COHABITING COUPLES

Using a sample of 1,365 cohabiting couples, family scholars Brian Willoughby, Jason Carroll, and Dean Busby at Brigham Young University identified five different types of cohabiting couples based on partners’ responses to three questions: (a) “In your relationship, who is moving faster toward marriage?”; (b) “How long will it be from now until you and your partner marry?”; and (c) “Are you engaged to be married?” Three of the five cohabiting types included partners who were engaged to be married: *incongruent engaged cohabiters* included individuals who felt that the relationship was moving faster (or slower) toward marriage than they would like or who felt pressure to marry from their partner, whereas the other two types, *engaged cohabiters moving fast* and *engaged cohabiters moving slow*, had congruence between partners regarding their movement toward marriage, just with different speeds. The other two types of cohabiting couples were not engaged, with *incongruent non-engaged cohabiters* experiencing ambiguity over whether or not their relationship was moving toward marriage and at what speed, and *non-engaged cohabiters without marital plans* reporting that neither partner was moving toward marriage.

After controlling for differences in relationship length, race, education, marital importance, and religiosity in the study, Willoughby and his colleagues found that incongruent engaged cohabiters (a) were less satisfied in their relationship than engaged cohabiters moving fast or slow, and (b) used less positive communication than individuals in engaged dating relationships, engaged moving fast cohabiting relationships, and engaged moving slow cohabiting relationships. More importantly, they found that individuals in non-engaged cohabiting relationships tended to report the most negative relational and communicative outcomes of those in any of the couple types. Consequently, their research not only advances our understanding of how cohabitation and communication may differ depending on partners’ expectations of marriage, it demonstrates how such differences influence couples’ satisfaction and stability. In doing so, their findings illustrate that how partners move toward creating a new family matters.

For further reading, see Willoughby, B. J., Carroll, J. S., & Busby, D. M. (2011). The different effects of “living together”: Determining and comparing types of cohabiting couples. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 29, 397–419.

types of cohabiting couples in an effort to understand how cohabitation influences later marital and family functioning. Take a look at “Family Matters” to see what researchers are finding among different types of cohabiting couples.

Gender-Organized Couple Types Other researchers have created couple types based on how gender beliefs are used to organize the relationship.⁹² Imagine how members of the following three couple types can be applied to dual-earner and single-earner couples in what are called *post-gender* couples. These are couples who have made a conscious effort to move past gender as a way to organize the relationship and tasks associated with it. For example, partners who have consciously chosen to perceive each other as having equal responsibility and power in all household and child-rearing tasks would be considered post-gender. These couples will be especially reliant on communication to negotiate who takes on which responsibilities in the home. *Gender-legacy* couples do not overtly recognize gender as the reason for their division of labor, but use it by default to do so. For example, if both spouses work, the wife in a gender-legacy couple may be more likely to organize her schedule to maximize her time at home. Although he perceives himself to be an equal partner in child care, a husband may describe his wife as being more “in tune” with others’ needs, and thus, better at caring for their child.⁹³ *Traditional couples* use gender as a conscious method of dividing labor in the relationship and see their roles, though different, as equal. Although each takes on different tasks as divided by gender—for example, a wife may do more child care and a husband home maintenance tasks—most view their roles as deserving equal respect.

Such use of gender also affects parenting and the construction of the role of mother. For example, fathers in traditional and gender-legacy couples may have an indirect relationship with their children that is moderated by the mother.⁹⁴ Instead of caring for children because the children need their care, these fathers report caring for children because the mother needs a break. In contrast, post-gender fathers have direct relational connections with their children, assuming that responsibility is shared. Thus, you might hear a father in a traditional or gender-legacy relationship talk about babysitting his child and a post-gender father talk about parenting his child.

Whether based on marital ideologies, cohabitation status, or gender orientations and divisions of household labor, couple typologies help us understand meaningful differences in, and needs for, different communication behaviors. These typologies help researchers and therapists more fully understand the variability that exists in couples’ interaction patterns and help couples interact most effectively to meet their goals. In fact, one of the leading marital researchers, John Gottman, developed a well-known couple typology based on conflict styles. We will discuss his typology in Chapter 9. In the final section of this chapter, however, we want to briefly introduce you to family typologies, which move the focus away from the couple to the family as a system or group.

Family Typologies

You may recall from Chapter 2 that families can be understood and classified by their family communication patterns, particularly conformity and conversation orientations. You may also recall that researchers can use high/low distinctions on these two orientations to identify four family types: (a) *consensual*, (b) *pluralistic*, (c) *protective*, and (d) *laissez-faire* families. As we noted in Chapter 2, this typology recognizes that families can function well with different types of behaviors and that there is not just one functional way to communicate.⁹⁵

In addition to these four family types, other researchers have continued efforts to understand the variability that exists in other family forms. For example, one of the authors of this textbook, Paul Schrodt, has developed a typology of stepfamilies based on how stepchildren view their families as a whole, as well as their relationship with their primary stepparent (i.e., the stepparent with whom they have lived the longest if they have more than one stepparent). After surveying more than 580 stepchildren, Schrodt identified five types of stepfamilies that differed in their communication patterns in meaningful ways.⁹⁶ First, *bonded stepfamilies* were characterized by low levels of dissension and avoidance, and relatively high levels of stepfamily involvement, flexibility, and expressiveness. Stepchildren in bonded stepfamilies were more likely than stepchildren in other family types to think of their stepparent as a parent. Second, *functional stepfamilies* were characterized by moderately high levels of stepfamily involvement, flexibility, and expressiveness, as well as moderately low levels of stepfamily dissension and avoidance. Stepchildren in these families tended to think of their stepparents as friends rather than as parents.

Third, *ambivalent stepfamilies* were characterized by demonstrating higher levels of stepfamily dissension and avoidance, and by demonstrating more moderate levels of stepfamily involvement, flexibility, and expressiveness. Consistent with their name, stepchildren in these families reported mixed emotions toward their stepfamily. Fourth, *evasive stepfamilies* were characterized by moderately high levels of dissension and avoidance, moderately low levels of stepfamily involvement and flexibility, and expressiveness. Evasive stepfamilies functioned less well than bonded, functional, and ambivalent stepfamilies, due primarily to a lack of open communication within the stepparent–stepchild relationship and in the stepfamily as a whole. Last, *conflictual stepfamilies* were characterized by somewhat higher levels of expressiveness than evasive stepfamilies, as well as the highest levels of stepfamily dissension and avoidance, and the lowest levels of stepfamily involvement and flexibility among the five types.

Not only did Schrodt identify different types of stepfamilies, but he illustrated the validity and utility of his typology by reporting meaningful differences in communication competence and mental health among stepchildren in the five family types. For example, he found that stepchildren from bonded and functional stepfamilies reported higher levels of communication competence for themselves

and for their stepparents, as well as fewer mental health symptoms, than stepchildren from ambivalent, evasive, and conflictual stepfamilies.⁹⁷ His findings, in turn, help illustrate why typologies are helpful to researchers and practitioners as they seek to understand complex patterns of family interaction using much simpler conceptual schemes.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we relied on an interactional approach to roles so as to stress the effect of family interaction on role development and performance and vice versa. We began by discussing the McMaster model of family functioning, a model that describes five essential family functions that serve as the basis for family roles. We gave particular attention to aspects of each function where family member roles rely more heavily on communication. We then examined how roles are appropriated within families via family members' role expectations, role enactments, and role negotiations.

Finally, we explored a variety of couple and family typologies, as typologies provide useful tools for researchers and practitioners in their efforts to render family members' interactions more understandable and predictable. Whereas couple typologies make use of partners' marital ideologies, gender orientations, and other communication behaviors, family typologies move the focus away from the dyad to the family system as a whole by focusing on group dynamics. Regardless of their particular focus, however, typologies can help us understand the communication behaviors and patterns that undergird a family's relational environment.

Discussion Questions

1. Looking back at Rebekah's circumstances in the case that opened this chapter, how might her feelings and decisions regarding graduate school be influenced by her role expectations, as well as her husband's role expectations, at home? To what extent are her responsibilities at school and at home interfering with her role performance in both contexts? And what advice might you give her to (re)negotiate her family responsibilities with her husband and children so as to finish her degree program?
2. Considering Jarvis, Sylvia, and Jamal's situation in the second case study, how are Sylvia's actions helping Jarvis navigate family life as a solo parent? How might Jamal's expectations of, and feelings about, Sylvia influence her willingness to enact "parental" responsibilities in their family? How might Jarvis negotiate Sylvia's role within their family with Jamal? And given the different types of stepfamilies we discussed in this chapter, if Jarvis and Sylvia

were to marry each other, what type of stepfamily do you think they would have?

3. How do you believe family roles might change by 2025, if at all? How might families be similar or different at that point, given ongoing changes in family diversity, culture, and time spent? What new roles may emerge or disappear?
4. Reflecting back on your own family of origin, how did your parents carry out the role functions involved in providing resources and nurturance for the family? To what extent were their role behaviors gender-stereotypical? To what extent were they gender atypical?
5. How have family roles in your family of origin changed over time? And what has been the effect of these role changes on the family system?
6. How do different communication technologies affect family roles and communication patterns today? How has this changed over the last 10 to 15 years? What changes do you anticipate by 2025?

Key Words

Complementary others	Role conflict
Conflict types	Role enactment
Dual-career couple	Role expectations
Dual-earner couple	Role negotiation
Familism	Significant others
Family roles	Spillover
McMaster model of family functioning	

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